



General Sir Claude Auchinleck, o.c.i.g., c.b., c.s.i., d.s.o., o.b.e., and General Sir Archibald Wavell, o.c.b., c.m.g., m.c.

"The outstanding military discoveries of the war"—*The Prime Minister*



# THE TIGER STRIKES

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*FOREWORD by*

GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD WAVELL, G.C.B.,  
C.M.G., M.C., A.D.C.

**T**HIS is a short record of the exploits of troops from India, British and Indian, in the theatres of war of the Middle East during 1940-41. It is a stirring and impressive story. For a period of eight or nine months, from December 1940 to July 1941, from the great victory of Sidi Barrani to the capture of Damascus, the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions were engaged almost continuously. They fought in the dusty wastes of the western desert, in the bush of the Abyssinian border, on the dry scorching plains of the Sudan, in the towering rocky mountains of Eritrea and Abyssinia, and amid the softer and greener hills of Syria.

With their comrades from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and many other parts of the British Empire, the Indians utterly defeated two great Italian armies; they helped to hold Tobruk and to stem the German counter offensive in Cyrenaica; and to save Iraq and Syria from enemy domination.

At Keren and Amba Alagi they stormed two positions which their enemies had with some reason deemed impregnable; at Mechili an Indian Motor Brigade fought with impressive gallantry to cover a retreat; a brigade of an Indian division led what seemed a forlorn hope against the defences of

Damascus and by their courage made the capture of that city possible

India may well be proud of her troops which performed such feats In all these battles British and Indian soldiers fought side by side in mutual comradeship and esteem

Off the field, their discipline and soldierly bearing, their good humour and kindness have everywhere aroused admiration

May all good fortune and success continue to attend the efforts of these magnificent troops in the great cause for which they are fighting

## PREFACE

IN 1939, some weeks before the outbreak of war, the first Indian troops appeared in Egypt. They were the vanguard of two Indian divisions, who were to play one of the foremost parts in the battles of the Middle East. At that time there was peace in the Mediterranean. General Sir Archibald Wavell was in command of the British Imperial Forces, but the Supreme Commander of the Allied defence in the Middle East was General Weygand, and the mainland strength was formed by the French colonial armies. In June 1940, Italy chose what Mussolini evidently thought to be the psychological moment, and entered the war as France collapsed beneath the swift and terrible blows dealt by the German army on the western front. Suddenly, in a few days, General Wavell found that he and his troops had to hold the Middle East alone. The French armies of Tunisia, Syria and French Somaliland were no longer available. The Italians, with large forces both in Libya and in East Africa, had not only a tremendous advantage in numbers but had been preparing and equipping for years for the possibility of a major conflict—and now they had only General Wavell's small army to face on a huge front stretching from Kenya to the western borders of Egypt. At sea they could bring their whole fleet against the handful of warships His Majesty's Navy was able to spare for the Mediterranean. In the air, as the enemy was well aware, the Royal Air Force needed almost every machine to win the Battle of Britain from the Luftwaffe.

The one asset on the right side was the fact that until Britain's land, sea and air forces were crushed, Italy's communications with her East African Empire were, except by air, definitely cut. The Italians had of course prepared for that eventuality and had poured enormous quantities of equipment and stores into Abyssinia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland.

In the western desert of Egypt, General Wavell, with an incomplete armoured division, an incomplete Indian division and a small number of newly arrived British, Australian and New Zealand troops faced Marshal Graziani's Libyan armies, amounting to something over three hundred thousand men.

In East Africa, Italy also had an army of more than a quarter of a million. Against this, in the Sudan, General Wavell had the small Sudan Defence Force and two British battalions. In Kenya were the King's African Rifles and some detachments from East and South Africa. In British Somaliland was the locally recruited Somali Land Camel Corps.

The outlook was unsettled, to put it mildly. Democracy's David faced a Fascist Goliath. Before the Italian had even embarked upon what he obviously anticipated would be a walk over, General Wavell ordered offensive patrolling on the Egyptian and Sudan frontiers. In the south the Sudan Defence Force took the initiative and compelled the reinforcement of Italian outposts. The Royal Air Force, though pitifully weak in machines, began a deliberate and intensive bombing of bases, petrol dumps and supply depots throughout East Africa, where the enemy could not replace such losses. In Egypt units of the armoured division, and particularly the 11th Hussars, embarked on a

series of pinpricks which had most disconcerting results for the Italians. Gradually Marshal Graziani reinforced his much harassed outposts like the fort of Capuzzo, and began to press the scanty British screen back over the Egyptian border.

A serious Italian advance did not begin until the late summer and autumn, but when it did General Wavell offered no serious opposition; he contented himself with sharp rearguard actions against Italian forward troops, permitting them in Kenya, the Sudan and Egypt to occupy large but useless desert areas at a disproportionate cost in casualties to the invader. In each case, like a river running into sand, the forward move petered out, handicapped as it was by the enormous numbers the Italians employed. In the meantime a measure of British reinforcements in men and material had begun to arrive. Early in the winter of 1940 it was decided to take the offensive rather than await the further advances for which the Italians were obviously, but laboriously, preparing. Then took place that amazing series of victories which extinguished Italy's East African Empire and removed the immediate threat of a land invasion of Egypt.

Using small but very mobile, well equipped and highly trained forces, General Wavell struck at the greatly superior Italian army in the western desert of Egypt. Within two months the Italians in Cyrenaica had been annihilated, but before that *campaign was even complete Wavell had struck* again. This time it was against Italian East Africa, where the enemy, evidently disconcerted by Marshal Graziani's invasion having gone into reverse, had actually begun to withdraw from British soil before our armies attacked. From Kenya in



the south and the Sudan in the west, Imperial troops started on two epic pursuits, storming each position where the enemy attempted to make a stand, and within two and a half months securing the colonies of Eritrea and Italian Somaliland and the greater part of Abyssinia. Asmara and Addis Ababa were occupied, British Somaliland was reconquered and the remaining Italian forces in Abyssinia were quickly added to the bag.

Leaving a few troops in Abyssinia to mop up the remaining pockets of resistance in that huge and mountainous country, General Wavell again switched troops and armaments back to Egypt and Syria to meet the German, who was now coming to the rescue of his battered Italian ally. In these lightning campaigns General Wavell had taken from the enemy 350,000 prisoners of war, vast masses of equipment, arms and ammunition at a cost which in any military estimate would be counted as negligible in relation to the results achieved.

The account which follows of the part played by troops from India in Egypt, Eritrea, Abyssinia and Syria does not claim to be either a military history or by any means the whole story. It has been compiled by Major W. G. Hingston, of the 1st Punjab Regiment, who was until March with the 4th Indian Division. Apart from first hand knowledge, the material has been culled from such reports as are so far available, from the war diaries of the units involved, from the despatches of Indian Army observers overseas, and from first hand conversations with those who took part in the operations.

The 4th Indian Division, when it went overseas, had no modern equipment. None of the officers or men had ever handled an anti tank rifle or a mortar. There were no motor vehicles and

no trained drivers. Though the re-organisation of the Indian army from an animal to a mechanical transport basis was sanctioned, equipment had not yet begun to reach India. On arrival in Egypt, vehicles and weapons were issued as they were received and the units were trained. Desert warfare is very different from mountain warfare, and yet these men showed astonishing quickness in picking up the new tactics, knowledge of the new weapons and the driving and maintenance of motor vehicles.

In both the 4th and the 5th Indian Divisions, in addition to British gunners, there were three British battalions, and throughout these campaigns British and Indians fought shoulder to shoulder, sharing the same dangers and discomforts, and acquiring a remarkable degree of admiration and friendship for each other. A letter from a young officer in a British battalion gives some indication of this spirit. He wrote: "When we were first put into the Indian division we resented it greatly. We wanted to be in a British division with our own kind, and not mixed up with a lot of 'koi hais' and Indians whose language we could not speak and whom we did not even begin to understand. But after being through Keren we feel quite differently. If anyone ever suggests to you that Indian troops are not all that might be desired, just you clip him one at once. They are damned good fighters, and we don't want to leave the Division at all. Although our fellows cannot speak to them, they get on together in first class style. The Indians are so friendly and pleasant, and yet such MEN. No wonder these Indian army officers are so cocky about them".

There is sometimes a tendency to admire defence against heavy odds and for history to

record in glowing terms those courageous retreats which have so often saved us from disaster, and in consequence to forget victories as something to be taken for granted. The retreat from Mons, the defence of Ypres, and the great German attack in March 1918 are remembered as the highlights of the Kaiser's War, while few recollect the Battle of Amiens of August 1918. The corollary is that any victory gained on our part is often estimated as having been secured against poor opposition or against an enemy whose morale is crumbling. During the winter of 1940-41 in North and East Africa it was suggested in many quarters that the Italians had not their heart in the war and that they were poor fighters. That was far from the case—until the collapse of the "invasion of Egypt" and the fall of the "impregnable" Keren convinced them that they were up against troops of better quality, fighting in a better cause. Figures of the actual odds in favour of the enemy on the field of battle, not to mention the reserves he had at his disposal, are illuminating.

Sidi Barrani	3	to	1
Gallabat	2	to	1
Agordat	1 75	to	1
Barentu	1 25	to	1
Keren	2 25	to	1
Massawa	1 25	to	1
Amba Alagi	1 25	to	1
Damascus	1	to	1

With the exception of the initial evacuation of British Somaliland and the action at Mechili, this story is one of continuous success, the two outstanding victories being those of Sidi Barrani and Keren, with the fight at Mezze, near Damascus, as the peak of Indian gallantry.

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# ONE

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## *British Somaliland and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*

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JUNE 1940 found British Somaliland with only the locally recruited Somaliland Camel Corps, maintained for preventing looting and for chasing raiding parties in the deserts of this inhospitable country. The Sudan was in an even worse state; a mere 5,000 troops were widely scattered over this land of deserts and swamps half as big as India. But at the outbreak of war with Italy the Sudan Defence Force at once took the initiative. Raids on frontier posts and on patrols kept the enemy on tenter-hooks. Not until July did the Italians take the offensive. Strong forces then attacked and captured the Sudan frontier towns of Kassala, Gallabat and Kurmuk. The Imperial troops, although outnumbered by as much as 10 to 1, were

The British Air Force in these parts was very small, but it began the war well, bombing bases, destroying petrol dumps and inflicting on the enemy losses which could not be replaced. But in forward areas the enemy gained air supremacy, mainly owing to the scarcity of aircraft to oppose him, and the R A F's inability to maintain landing grounds sufficiently far forward on the treacherous cotton soil during the wet weather. In distant bombing the enemy failed to take advantage of his numerical superiority, few attempts, and all ineffective, being made to destroy the bridges over the Blue Nile and Atbara Rivers.

During August the Italians were busy conquering British Somaliland. In September their forces advanced from Libya into the western desert of Egypt. Towards the end of September an attack on the practically defenceless Sudan was daily expected. It did not take place, however, and our forces, which had been reinforced by the 5th Indian Division, noticed signs of apprehension among the enemy troops. Steps were taken to augment their fears by raids, offensive patrols and bluff. British officers penetrated into Abyssinian territory and assisted the inhabitants to raise patriot troops against their oppressors. This threat to their rear gradually drew Italian troops away from their aggressive designs on the Sudan and Kenya. The initiative thus slowly passed to the still numerically inferior British forces.

### *British Somaliland*

The defection of the French in French Somaliland left the position of British Somaliland very precarious. At first it was considered that the country was not worth fighting for, it is practically all desert with no industries or products and could

only be a liability to the Italians. Then it was decided that although there were insufficient forces to hold the country it would be worth while making the Italians fight for it and so use up their carefully husbanded supplies. A small force, consisting of battalions of the Black Watch, 2nd Punjab Regiment and 15th Punjab Regiment, was therefore sent to meet the large Italian forces being massed across the frontier.

The story of the fight in British Somaliland can be told briefly. On land, as at sea, the Italians had shown themselves disinclined to try conclusions in battle save where and when the odds were heavily in their favour. Into this country they brought more than two divisions with tanks, aircraft and heavy artillery in support. The small force against them, including Somalis and a few troops from East Africa, had little equipment, and was quite insufficient to hold a continuous line.

In the ring of hills surrounding Berbera the Imperial troops took up positions covering the passes, the most famous of which is the Tug Argan Gap. Patently over-confident under cover of their tanks, artillery and air support, the Italians attacked the thinly defended posts in massed formation and were time and again mown down by withering fire. Their opponents took full advantage of darkness to effect retirements from one position to another, and as a result the enemy often lost contact only to find themselves up against stolid opposition from new and unexpected directions. Even the most audacious defence could not, however, prevent infiltration; the enemy's steady advance was recognised to be as inevitable as it proved costly to them.

Indian troops for the first time experienced dive bombing during this fighting. The howl of

the aeroplane engines, the whistle of bombs and the devastating crash of explosions at first rather shook these soldiers many of whom had never been attacked from the air before. Yet in a very short time they realised that noise does not kill and that a trench is very good protection. Dive bombing lost its terrors.

The withdrawal to the port now began. One company of the 15th Punjab, holding out against a concentrated enemy assault, became isolated and was feared to be lost, but by a skilful night march it evaded the enemy and rejoined the rearguard two days later. Such losses had been inflicted on the enemy that re-embarkation was carried out unopposed. The total casualties of our forces was 38 killed, 71 wounded and 49 missing. It was thought at the time that the Italians must have lost ten times these figures. After the recapture of Berbera our troops found large numbers of graves and it was considered that the enemy's losses must have been nearer twenty times more than our own. The Italians had had to pay dearly for a barren victory.

### *The Sudan*

During September the 5th Indian Division arrived in the Sudan and was moved up onto the frontier. The Anglo Egyptian Sudan is a huge country of varying types, desert in the north, east and west with tropical swamps in the south. Adjoining Eritrea and Abyssinia there are between 1,200 and 1,300 miles of frontier, ranging over the utter desert of the coastal plain, the rocky hills and scrub desert in the Kassala area, the savannah of Gedaref, to the thick tropical forest of the south. The 5th Division was widely dispersed part watching the enemy at Gallabat, part at Gedaref and Butana Bridge, while there were detachments at



Lieutenant General Sir Louis Heath KBE, CB, CIE, DSO, MC  
Commanding the 5th Indian Division



"The daily bag of prisoners . . ."

ambushes, attacking isolated parties and causing worry and loss to the enemy. A substantial reverse to the Italians was now necessary to make this smouldering movement flame into a serious rising. It was therefore decided to drive the enemy back over the border at Gallabat. Though the move would have no strategic importance, it would force the Italians out of the Sudan at one point, thereby lowering the morale of the enemy and showing the Abyssinians that British forces were able to take the offensive.

### *Gallabat*

Gallabat is a fort and small village just on the Sudan side of the frontier, about 100 miles south of Gedaref. Opposite is Metemma, a village and fort, across a deep nala known as the Boundary Khor. On either side are steep rocky hills, covered with scrub and long grass. Movement of vehicles off the roads is not possible, for the whole country is covered with elephant grass six to twelve feet high. Between Gedaref and Gallabat ran an indifferent track on which the Sappers and Miners did much work in October.

On November 6 a small mixed force attacked the enemy position at Gallabat, and had the privilege of instituting the first British offensive in Africa. The Baluch Regiment which was holding the outpost line in contact with the enemy, seized a hill overlooking the fort during the night, and covered the flank of the advance. At 5.30 a.m. the fort was thoroughly bombed, while the artillery put down a heavy concentration on it. The Royal Garhwal Rifles followed up tanks in a direct assault. The fort was reached by 6.40 a.m. and fierce hand to hand fighting ensued. The enemy fought well. Some very stout hearted Italians and Eritreans, who had

remained to fight in spite of the severe bombing and shelling, took a deal of evicting. One enemy machine gunner was bombed away from his gun three times, but kept on till finally crushed at his post by a tank.

As soon as the Garhwalis had mopped up all the enemy in and near the fort, the Essex Regiment moved forward to attack Metemma if this were possible. It was found that there were thick belts of barbed wire around the Boundary Khor, and as the enemy was obviously holding prepared positions strongly, it was decided not to try to advance any further. Meanwhile the enemy started to bomb the Essex Regiment and the Garhwalis heavily. Owing to rain the previous night R A F fighter aircraft had to use landing grounds far back, meaning that Italian bombers could not be opposed for more than a few minutes at a time. The enemy planes came over in large numbers and bombed with accuracy. The troops, unable to dig trenches in the hard rock, had a very tough time, and it was found impossible to hold the fort. The overlooking hills were however retained, thus making it impossible for the Italians to re occupy it.

The casualties sustained in this action, an attack on a position which had had four months' preparation, are interesting. These figures for the enemy only include the wounded made captive (many more were presumably able to get away) while ours show all, including the slightly wounded.

	British and Indian	Italians
Killed	33	189
Wounded	154	231
Captured	nil	214

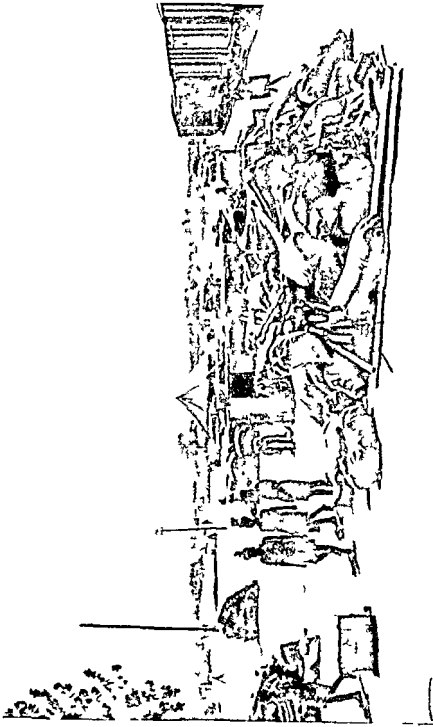


The results of this battle were heartening, for Gallabat assumed a psychological importance out of all proportion to its real value, which was that of just another ridge offering observation for further advance. The fact that the enemy had been driven back across the border, gave the patriot movement in Abyssinia considerable stimulus and heartened the Commonwealth with its first land success.

After this action constant offensive patrolling was maintained, shaking the enemy's morale and inflicting further casualties. British gunners forced the Italians to evacuate the town and fort of Metemma, which became a no man's land in this area. The troops which took part had been blooded and in their patrolling were so fierce that the enemy feared to stir out of their trenches behind barbed wire. In addition to the daily bag of prisoners, a steady stream of deserters began to come in.

At the same time as the fight at Gallabat was taking place, Gazelle was having a series of little battles on its own near Kassala. Late in October a party of the enemy was ambushed behind Kassala, fifteen colonials were killed, six were captured, while several lorries and the telegraph line were destroyed. Gazelle suffered no casualties whatsoever and slipped away when enemy reinforcements came out of Kassala. From November 6 to 11 an action was fought near Jebel Serobotib, some 30 miles north east of Kassala, over very difficult rocky country. Two companies of the 2nd Punjab Regiment and one company of 12th Frontier Force Regiment assisted Skinner's Horse in this fight in which 262 prisoners were taken and considerable damage inflicted.

Opposite Um Hager also our forces were active. One day a patrol of the Mahrattas chased some



*Jebel Kaassla, the highest peak of which has never been climbed*



In the Western Desert during the Battle of Sidi Barrani, General Sir Archibald Wavell talks to Lieutenant General Sir Richard O'Connor, K.C.B., D.S.O., M.C., Commanding the forces in the Western Desert.

enemy cavalry as far as the frontier. On another occasion a colonial battalion was ambushed in the scrub and fled in disorder. All through November and December these small actions went on, continually harassing the enemy and creating an impression of superior strength. The Italian Intelligence Service was completely "foxed". They reported that an Australian Division had attacked them at Gallabat, a compliment to the one battalion of Garhwalis in their broad-brimmed hats.

# TWO

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## *The Western Desert*

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THE situation in Egypt was gravely prejudiced by the collapse of France, particularly by the defection of the French troops in Tunisia, which released large Italian forces for an attack on Egypt. During August 1940 it became clear that an enemy advance along the coast was being planned. Reinforcements were immediately required in the Western Desert to support the British 7th Armoured Division, which had been in contact with the Italians since the previous June. On August 19 the 4th Indian Division moved out from the Nile Delta.

The flat, stony plain of the western desert of Egypt is in no way similar to the deserts of India. A thin layer of dusty soil tops solid rock which in some places lies uncovered, bare flat slabs grilling in the sun. There are no trees. Except near the coast, where the soil has been blown into hummocks, there is no vegetation at all. The rainfall is small, decreasing rapidly inland, so much so that 30 miles from the coast there is never any rain. During the occupation of Egypt by the Romans some 2,000 years ago, the desert was

developed for the growing of corn, a fact hard to believe, but in those days there used to be much more earth on top of the rock; twenty centuries of strong wind blowing off the land have carried most of the soil into the Mediterranean Sea. This bare, desolate land is inhabited only by a few wandering Bedouins, who trek from one water hole to another and eke out a miserable existence with the grain they grow near the coast. The chief features of the desert are the cisterns, hewn in the rock to collect the surface water and store it for the times of drought. Made by the Romans, most of these cisterns, known as Birs, have silted up, but there are still many in use to this day. Distinguished by a mound of soil, possibly ten feet high, beside a hole in the ground some three feet square, they are the sole landmarks in the featureless desert. Consequently these little hillocks, which would be unnoticeable in any other country, have become of importance in military operations, while some such as *Bir Sofafi*, *Bir Enba* or *Bir Gobi*, are now well known throughout the world.

The land rises from the coast in a series of escarpments of varying abruptness, but always of naked, rugged rock, cut and fissured by water-courses through which water but rarely flows. The main escarpment leaves the coast at Sollum, running south-eastward down into the desert to disappear some 25 miles south of Sidi Barrani. It starts again on the coast 30 miles east of Sidi Barrani, passes south of Mersa Matruh and fades away near Gerawla, to appear once more at Ma'aten Baqqush. Inland there are other escarpments less steep, but in some places presenting an impassable face to motor traffic. Except for these curious cliffs there are no obstacles in the desert and motors can drive anywhere. This provides the outstanding feature of desert warfare, where tanks,

trucks and even heavy lorries can pick their own way, formations sometimes moving on a front of four or more miles instead of the 18 feet provided by the normal road

The 4th Indian Division at this time consisted of two Indian Infantry Brigades, but these two brigades were more highly trained than probably any other in the world. For nearly a year they had been in Egypt training with the new weapons and vehicles with which they had been issued, learning new types of warfare and above all becoming desert wise, units of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps had been gaining actual experience working with British Armoured Regiments. The Division was proud of itself and confident of its ability to deal with the Italians. There was healthy though friendly rivalry between units. In the division were Bengal, Madras and Bombay Sapper and Miner Companies among which also the competition was keen. The RIASC units rather scornfully wanted to know what all the fuss was about they had been on active service already. Divisional Headquarters patted them all on the back, but secretly thought that they were all lucky to have such good headquarters behind them. There were two British battalions in the division, and the gunners were British also. The remainder of the infantry, all the cavalry, engineers, supply, medical and ordnance services were Indian. Everyone realised that they were only getting their due when they were told that the 4th Indian Division was the crack infantry formation in the Middle East. The British 7th Armoured Division had, of course, already earned an enviable reputation in desert fighting.

The move to the desert was done partly by rail and partly across country. All desert worthy

vehicles were driven across firstly the sand desert and then the stony desert, one of the highest tests of driving imaginable, and yet only one per cent of vehicles had to be abandoned even temporarily. On arrival work was at once begun preparing a defensive position. Digging in the solid rock was no joke at all, but the speed with which the trenches went down was phenomenal. To see the sepoy with crowbars and picks battering at the rock, until it cracked and was lifted out amidst acclamations, was a curiously inspiring sight. The Sappers and Miners worked like heroes, blasting the rock, erecting concrete pill boxes, assisting with dug outs and water supply. The hours of work were long, from sunrise to sunset, after dark no lights were allowed but as the nights were short this was not much handicap at this time of year. The British troops were so tanned by the blazing sun from which there was no shade that they became as dark as the Indians, while the way in which all fraternised made this encampment in the desert a friendly and happy place.

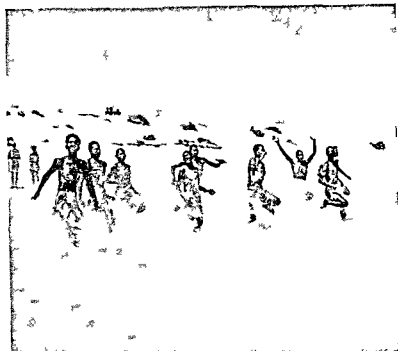
In September a British brigade joined the division. Just at this time the Italian advance began, harassed by the Armoured Division. The Central India Horse, who had been rather scandalised that a Cavalry Regiment should have to dig, were sent out to cover demolition parties on the Matruh Sidi Barrani Road. Though machine-gunned from the air they finished their task without other interference from the enemy and returned to the Division. Meanwhile about a dozen casualties had been suffered by the Division from thermos bombs dropped by the Italians. These bombs do not explode when dropped, but lie on the ground in a live state. When moved they explode. This secret was discovered at once by the Sappers and Miners. For the next two days many units



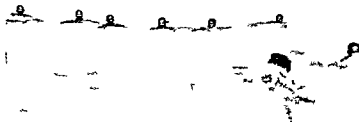
had some fun finding and destroying these deadly instruments. Each invented its own method and many were the arguments as to which had the most efficient idea.

The Italian advance got no further than Sidi Barrani and our division carried on with the preparation of its defensive positions. Life in the desert was hard. Now that dug outs were being finished, the nights were more tolerable, but the hours were long and the water ration small. One and a half gallons a day left little for ablutions and none for washing clothes. Fortunately the sea was close. The bathing must have been of the best in the world, the quickly shelving beach, clear smooth water and no tide made it ideal. Sea water soap was issued, and though it was impossible to get a good lather, it was possible to get clean. The conditions were especially unkind to the Sikhs, for the sea water matted and hardened their hair and beards. It was a common sight to see a line of sepoy's standing up to their waist in the sea, flogging the water with their clothes to try to get them clean, and it was reported that on one occasion a bevy of brigadiers had been seen surreptitiously doing likewise in a little cove known as General's Beach. After being washed in salt water clothes became stiffer than any dhobi in India starches them, and shorts could be seen standing up on the ground to air. Dust was the bane of existence. Motor traffic cut up the surface of the ground so that the slightest breeze raised clouds of white, clinging dust. Fortunately during the hot weather in August and September high winds did not blow, but in November the storms began and then conditions were vile. Visibility was frequently reduced to five yards, trenches filled in a few hours, food and bedding were contaminated, eyes, ears, nose and mouth





Fortunately the sea was close



*Enemy Dispositions*

The enemy by this time had made himself secure (as he thought) in his position at Sidi Barrani. He had constructed a good road from Fort Capuzzo through Sollum and Buq Buq nearly as far as Sidi Barrani, and he had laid a pipeline for water all the way from Bardia. The Italian is a good engineer. He had brought up large supplies of stores in preparation for a further advance. To protect his lines of communication, which ran along the coast, he had placed his troops in large defended camps in a half circle from the sea to the top of the escarpment at Bir Sofafi. These camps five to ten miles apart were really fortresses, being strongly defended with mines, anti-tank obstacles, trenches and in some cases wire. The camps were too far distant to support each other, but they were able with one exception to cover the gaps between them by artillery fire. The exception was the Bir Enba Gap between Nibeiba and Rabia. During November the Italians tried to close the gap, but were thwarted by the ever vigilant British armoured units.

This system of perimeter camps seems to have been devised by the Italians as a protection against the enterprise of the tank and armoured car commanders of the Armoured Division, who had shown a persistent aggressive spirit from the beginning of the campaign. They had kept the Italians continually under observation and in fear of raids. As a general rule defence is by its very nature static, whereas the offensive gives opportunity for mobility and diversity of tactics. In this desert warfare it proved to be the reverse. The fighting spirit of these British troops forced the vastly superior attacking forces to adopt a rigid defence utterly unsuited to the conditions.

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Both for attaining and preventing surprise accurate reconnaissance is essential. This, unfortunately for themselves, the Italians neglected. They relied entirely on their air arm to give them notice of any movement in front of their line, and were badly let down. On the other hand while our air forces were used for distant reconnaissance and for photography, our armoured troops watched the enemy forward positions. The daring with which this was achieved was extraordinary, subalterns and N.C.O.s frequently penetrating right inside the Italians' fortified camps and exploring their secrets.

The largest enemy camp was Maktila, on the coast some 15 miles east of Sidi Barrani, garrisoned by the 1st Libyan Division with a large number of guns and some tanks. The Cameron Highlanders carried out a raid in November on this camp, and although the results were disappointing, much was learnt about enemy tactics and methods of defence. One young officer with six men managed to get into the camp and had a joyous time burning two lorries and destroying another four with picks and crowbars. He reported with relish that the tyres were ripped up easily with bayonets, the steering wheels snapped with little effort, the gear levers were twisted and the cylinder blocks cracked with crowbars. They left the tap of a water tank running with almost fiendish delight, for in this country water was more valuable than either petrol or food

Some ten miles to the south-west was the next camp, known as Pt. 90. Three miles to the west was Tummar East and a further three miles away was Tummar West. These camps contained the 2nd Libyan Division, and were strongly defended. South of Tummar West was Nibeiwa the strongest of all and manned by the Maletti Mobile Group

with a Battalion of Medium Tanks This fortress contained many motor vehicles and about 4,000 men, Italian and Libyan

Further to the south beyond the Bir Enba Gap lay the Sofafi Group of Camps, four well sited positions on top of the escarpment adequately supplied with tanks, and garrisoned by a Division of Italian Regulars Behind this outer line of defences were more positions Blackshirt Divisions at Sidi Barrani and Sollum and a regular division at Buq Buq The enemy had in this strip of occupied Egypt, six divisions, one Mobile Group and two tank brigades Though other troops were available, General Wavell had actually facing this large force only two divisions, one armoured and one infantry But a battalion of "I" tanks had arrived, and such confidence did these giants inspire that the troops were eager to challenge the Italians

# THREE

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## *The Battle of Sidi Barrani*

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THE 4th Indian Division moved out of its defensive positions early on the morning of December 6, 1940. It was a cold, cloudy day with a rising wind which gave promise of a heavy dust-storm later on. There was a feeling of tenseness in the air, for although the reason given for the move was that the Division was taking part in another full-scale exercise, everyone suspected that something more was afoot. Moving in well dispersed groups the force crawled across the desert, hidden from air observation by the thick dust, with everyone muffled to the eyes to keep out the piercing cold. By afternoon the Division, having covered about 50 miles across country, was concentrated in the area of Bir Kenayis some 30 miles south of Mersa Matruh. Though it had been a most unpleasant day, the troops agreed that a third-class ride was better than a first-class walk. As soon as slit trenches had been dug all turned in to get as much sleep as possible.

For two nights the Division remained in this place, dispersed over an enormous area. Enemy

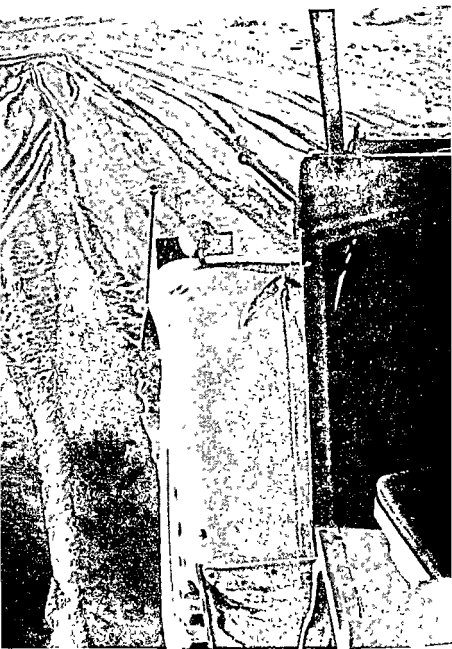
aeroplanes passed over several times, but they saw nothing, although there was no bush nor tree nor cover of any kind to hide either men or vehicles

On December 7, orders were issued, and at last the troops learnt that they were about to be committed, not to an exercise, not even to a raid, but to a full scale attack on the enemy entrenched camps south of Sidi Barrani. The excitement and enthusiasm were immense. The corps commander, Lieutenant General R. N. O'Connor, D.S.O., M.C., visited the Division, and a special order from the C in C, containing a heartening message from the Prime Minister, was issued. When the men went to sleep that night, the last occasion for several days, all were on tiptoe of excitement and anticipation, full of confidence and genuinely happy and proud that after the long period of waiting and training they should have been selected for the great effort.

Briefly the plan for the attack was that the Armoured Division would "hold the ring" for the 4th Indian Division, which would attack first Nibeiwa, then the Tummar Camps and finally Sidi Barrani. Part of the Armoured Division was to watch the Sofafi Group of Camps while the remainder went through the Bir Enba Gap to form a screen against any counter attack from the direction of Buq Buq. In addition Selby Force, consisting of the Coldstream Guards and a battery of the South Notts Hussars, would make a demonstration against Maktala and contain the garrison of that camp. The R.A.F. had the task of dealing with a numerically superior enemy air force and so preventing the bombing and machine gunning of the attacking troops. Three battalions, one British and two Indian were held in reserve and took no part in the battle.



Lieutenant-General Sir Noel de la P. Beresford Pierse, K.B.E., D.S.O.,  
Commanding the 4th Indian Division.



"Motor traffic cut up the surface of the ground so that the slightest breeze raised clouds of white clinging dust."

Early on the morning of December 8 the advance began. It was a cold, bright day; no dust-storm blew to hide the great columns of vehicles moving up towards the enemy. Navigating officers, however, heaved sighs of relief, for it is far from easy work leading large forces over that open desert with no landmarks, while a duststorm puts grey hairs on to the head of the youngest guide.

The limitless plain was covered with black dots as the trucks, lorries and guns crept forward at about eight miles in the hour. Anxious glances were cast upwards, air attacks were expected at any moment, but no enemy planes appeared overhead. During the afternoon the sky became more overcast, and by 3.30 p.m. the Division was concentrated only 15 miles to the south-east of Nibeiwa camp. Once again the force had moved forward for 50 miles across the bare desert without being seen by the enemy air patrols. Since then various reasons have been put forward to explain how this huge body of troops was able to move nearly a hundred miles across completely open desert without being seen by the enemy. In olden days it would have been said simply that God blinded the eyes of the enemy. It is difficult to think of any other adequate explanation.

At this point the "I" tanks joined the infantry.\* These monsters had been creeping slowly forward for several days and had apparently moved the whole distance in a purely local dust-storm. The crews felt that the elements were fighting for us. The sight of just one of these tanks is inspiring, and to see a large collection like this has the tonic effect of a rum issue. From the enemy's point of view they are the most terrifying

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\*The "I" tank is a very heavily armoured tank, which precedes the infantry in an assault on an entrenched position



sight imaginable, for no ordinary gun is of any use against them

At night on December 8 9 the Navy bombarded Maktula, with the R A F dropping flares to light up the area. It must have been highly unpleasant for the garrison, even the mine sweepers came in close to add their little quota to the torrent of shells pouring into the camp. This was too much for the Libyan troops who refused to stay in the camp another night, and the commander was so busy quelling the trouble for the next 12 hours that he had no time to think of anything else

### *Nibewa*

It was dark by 6 p.m., but before this the Indian Division was on the move. The Cameron Highlanders and the Rajputana Rifles\* together with the "I" tanks moved slowly forward through the Bir Enba Gap. To the south the armoured troops could be heard moving on a parallel course. All through the night they crept along, the moon went down, but in the utter darkness there was no check. Keeping some five miles from the enemy perimeter, the party carried on, until they reached their rendezvous to the north west of Nibewa by 5 a.m. a brilliant piece of leadership without lights over previously unreconnoitred country.

A battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment had a different task. It moved forward on its own in lorries to within three miles of the east face of Nibewa, thence it worked forward on foot towards the perimeter. At about 3 a.m. enemy listening posts were encountered and fire was opened all along the east side of the camp. It was a

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\*The 6th Rajputana Rifles should not be confused with the 7th Rajput Regiment. They are different regiments and the Rajputana Rifles are never referred to as the Rajputs.

magnificent sight Tracer, star shells, flaming footballs, flares, the flashes from the guns and bursting shells lit the place up beautifully As soon as the enemy fire began to slacken, small parties of the Rajputs worked up into new positions and opened fire again At once the firework display re opened This continued until about 6 a m when the regiment withdrew It had done its work well The enemy had been kept busy, had used up a quantity of ammunition and most important of all had drowned the sound of our tanks and vehicles getting round the west face of the camp The second in command of Nibeirwa, who was later captured, said that he had heard vehicles moving to the south, but he thought that it was merely our armoured forces "fooling about again" When the Rajputs opened fire from the east side with no artillery support he imagined it was all a bluff and congratulated himself on his accurate appreciation of the situation It was not until our artillery began to shoot at 7 a m that he realised something serious was happening—and rose from his bed

After the Rajputs had left to "shoot up" the east face of the camp, the artillery group moved forward to a position south east of Nibeirwa At 7 a m, although it was not properly light, registration started and a quarter of an hour later a terrific concentration of artillery fire was put down on the camp The hail of shells poured down onto the defences, the lorry parks, the dumps and headquarters In the morning light the camp was blotted out by a huge cloud of dust, thickened by the smoke from burning trucks and stores For 25 minutes this fearful bombardment continued while the tanks and infantry advanced from the north west

The battalion of Italian tanks were in the habit of spending the night in leaguer outside the

gate at the north-west corner of the camp. There they were found by our advancing "I" tanks. Some of them had their engines running, but the crews were not ready. In less than five minutes every one of those 28 monsters was knocked out. In an area of about 500 yards square lay this collection of giants, many burning fiercely with their ammunition exploding, while on towards the perimeter of the camp swept the victorious "I" tanks, not one of which had even been stopped. On they went, up to the wall. Anti-tank guns, field guns, machine-guns and rifles blazed at them from the defences along the perimeter. The "I's" reached the wall, checked and then ponderously heaved themselves up, over and down into the doomed camp. The Italians and Libyans fought stoutly, the gunners in particular firing their guns until they were shot down or run over. But even a field gun, fired at 30 yards range, made no impression on these wonderful tanks. Across the camp they roared, putting a shell into each dug-out and firing their machine-guns down each trench. The enemy troops were aghast. Their anti-tank guns were useless, their Molotov Cocktails had no effect, they could do nothing.\*

Then came the armoured carriers of our battalions, shooting up strong points that had been passed, and holding the ground that had been won. The work of these crews was particularly gallant, for the carrier is not a light tank. Close behind rolled the infantry in lorries. Some 700 yards from the camp the lorries halted, and out poured the men. In front went the Cameron Highlanders, then the Rajputana Rifles. The

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\* General Maletti, the Italian Commander of Nibeiwa, was killed early on. He came out of his dug-out just as a tank approached, and was killed instantaneously. His son was wounded and captured.

Jocks mopped up the first half of the camp. The enemy, terribly shaken by the artillery bombardment and the invulnerable tanks, and having suffered heavy casualties, could not stand the sight of the bayonet. They now began to surrender in large numbers. The Camerons pushed on, storming isolated points of resistance, bombing dug-outs and collecting prisoners by the hundred. Through them went the Rajputana Rifles, to clear up the further half of the camp. Through the dust and smoke they advanced, the bayonet a terrible weapon in the hands of these men from the plains of northern India. By 8.25 a.m. all resistance was over. In one hour and 25 minutes from the firing of the first shell, this huge camp was in our possession. Nearly 4,000 prisoners had been taken, with many guns, lorries and vast quantities of stores. It was a magnificent victory.

Nibeiwa presented a fearsome sight. The wind was rising and in the swirling clouds of dust, columns of smoke rose from the burning tanks and lorries. An ammunition dump, blazing fiercely, added to the noise and confusion. Along the perimeter were many dead and wounded. Though the Italian doctors had stuck to their posts, the collection of the casualties was not easy owing to the duststorm which now became so dense that visibility was frequently down to a mere five yards. The thousands of prisoners were marshalled outside the camp, and were evacuated in captured transport. It has been very widely presumed that the large number of prisoners taken in this campaign indicated that the Italians did not fight. This is not correct. They fought well, but the conditions of desert warfare are such that defeated troops, deprived of their transport, cannot retire on foot to other positions owing to lack of water. Any body of men retreating into this grim desert

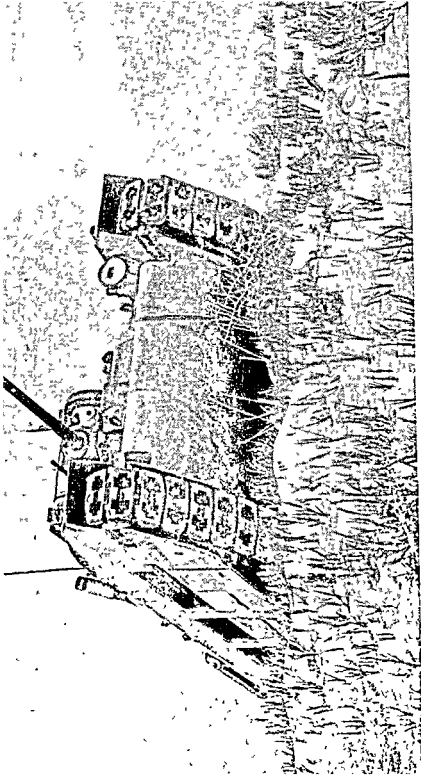
is doomed to a dreadful death of hunger and thirst. A few, very few, managed to get away to the Tummar Camps, but the surprise had been so complete and the attack so overwhelming that no organised retreat could be made.

From the west came the sound of firing where our armoured troops were engaged. In this story, little mention is made of the doings of the 7th Armoured Division, for it is only intended as a record of the actions of the Indian troops. But this should not be taken as any lack of appreciation of its great work. Its Cavalry and Tank Regiments have won a name for themselves equal to that of the famous Light Division in the Peninsular War.

### *The Tummar Camps*

At 8.40 a.m. the second phase began. A fresh brigade which included the Royal Fusiliers, the 1st Punjab Regiment and another battalion of the Rajputana Rifles moved round the south and west of Nibeiwa to a point some three miles due west of Tummar West Camp. The rendezvous was marked by no feature either on the ground or the map, and in the raging duststorm it entailed a most difficult piece of leading. The young officer responsible led the brigade with the calmness of an old hand and placed it with complete accuracy. The artillery group, escorted by the Rajput Regiment, moved northwards to the east of Nibeiwa, and by 10 a.m. all was set for the next assault. Actually the attack did not take place till some time later, due to the difficulty of locating the camp itself in the duststorm. Eventually the brigadier with his commanders had to drive to within 400 yards of the walls before its position was accurately ascertained, and thence make a hurried





"From the enemy's point of view they are the most terrifying sight imaginable."

withdrawal. Fortunately the Italians had sent no patrols to find out what was happening at Nibeirwa, they sat in Tummar West waiting to see what was going to happen next. At 1 p.m. they found out.

Once again the terrific storm of shells came down on the enemy, and the tanks, carriers and infantry started towards the western extremity of Tummar West. Again the tanks met with a stout resistance which once more was unavailing. The infantry carriers came in for a tougher time than at Nibeirwa, but they were handled with superb gallantry. It is difficult on these occasions to single out men for special mention, but the story of Havildar Kalyan Singh of the 1st Punjab Regiment will give some idea of the determination with which these carrier crews performed their perilous work. When inside the camp where there was still much resistance all around his carrier was set on fire by a hand grenade. He wrenched his gun from its mounting getting badly burnt as he did so, and at once went into action on the ground, silencing an enemy post. Not until his last round had been fired did he think of getting away, and then still under fire saw his men packed into another carrier before finding room for himself.

The infantry followed up in their lorries to within 150 yards of the walls. The drivers of these lorries were New Zealanders, who showed great bravery under fire in bringing their vehicles so close to the enemy position, many of them accompanied the infantry in the assault after debussing. Although there was considerable rifle and machine gun fire no man was hit in the lorries, probably because in the excitement the Italians forgot to lower their sights. A number of



casualties were suffered when crossing the open space to the walls of the camp, but there was no stopping the troops, who went in with tremendous dash and elan. Once again a British battalion (the Royal Fusiliers) led the way, and an Indian battalion (1st Punjab Regiment) passed through to take the further half of the fortifications. The Rajputana Rifles, remaining in lorries, proceeded along the north side of the camp, ready to move on to the attack on Tummur East.

The Fusiliers went in with the bayonet and soon had the first half of the camp mopped up. Many prisoners were taken but several casualties were incurred including Lieutenant Colonel Johnson, commanding the regiment, who was mortally wounded. Then the 1st Punjab Regiment went through with their commanding officer at their head. There was a much greater degree of resistance in this half of the camp than had previously been met, but the Punjabis proceeded methodically with the work of reducing strong points, clearing dug outs and collecting prisoners. By 4 p.m. the camp was entirely in our hands, except for a few machine gun posts in the eastern defences. Some three or four thousand prisoners and again large numbers of vehicles and stores were taken.

The scene was remarkable. Large 10 ton lorries filled with ammunition were burning and exploding. A huge dump of fireworks blazed merrily giving a display that would have drawn thousands at Diwali. The duststorm was dying down, but the camp was enshrouded by dense clouds of smoke. Documents, equipment, abandoned rifles and wounded lay everywhere. Yet in this scene of carnage mules were making the best of their opportunity amongst the stores of forage.

As soon as it was seen that the attack on Tummar West was successful, the Rajputana Rifles moved on to attack Tummar East. Just after passing the north-eastern corner of the captured camp, a counter attack accompanied by tanks developed from the east. Dismounting from their lorries the Rajputana Rifles\* poured in rifle and machine-gun fire from the flank, joining hands with the 1st Punjab Regiment\* in the defences. Two enemy light tanks attacked a platoon of the "Rajrif",† but a Lance Naik stalked one of them and set it on fire with a Molotov Cocktail. Both tanks thereupon surrendered. The enemy counter attack got into the south-east corner of the camp, but was repulsed by fire from Battalion Headquarters of the 1st Punjab Regiment. Another portion of the enemy forces then attacked the Rajputana Rifles, who drove them off with withering fire, inflicting over 200 casualties. The enemy in this assault lost 400 killed and wounded and 700 odd prisoners, but the attack on Tummar East was so delayed that it was postponed until the morning. The Rajputana Rifles patrolled throughout the night and next day at first light occupied Tummar East without opposition. The garrison had retired to Pt. 90.

At nightfall the British brigade had moved up to a position facing Sidi Barrani two miles north of Tummar West. Divisional Headquarters had joined the brigade inside the camp and the victors of Nibeiwa were moving up. The battle had been completely successful. Everything had

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\* These two battalions have covered themselves with glory during the fighting in the Middle East. This is the brief story of their first action, and later they were to show themselves even greater heroes at Agordat, before Keren, at the capture of Damascus, and in Cyrenaica in December 1941.

† "Rajrif" is the official abbreviation for the Rajputana Rifles, and is frequently used in conversation.

gone according to plan. Three enemy camps had been captured, some 7,000 prisoners had been taken, about 100 guns of all types, several hundred motor vehicles, vast quantities of stores and ammunition were in our hands, while upwards of 40 tanks had been destroyed. Our casualties had been almost ridiculously small. It was not surprising that the troops were confident that the next day would bring further successes.

Very little sleep was had by anyone that night. Rations had not arrived, but that made no difference for ample reserves for such an emergency were carried, also there was plenty of macaroni, tinned tunny fish, tomato sauce and cheese which were tried and quite liked for a change. The enemy did no bombing during the night, for he cannot have known what the situation was, and dared not bomb the Tummar West area for fear of damaging his own troops. Once again the Royal Navy under cover of darkness shelled Maktila, and this finally proved too much for the garrison which next day abandoned the position.

### *The Capture of Sidi Barrani*

Fighting reopened at an early hour on December 10\*. The British brigade began to advance at 5.30 a.m. The plan was for this brigade to get astride the two roads running west from Sidi Barrani towards Buq Buq. This would cut the line of retreat of the Blackshirt Division in Sidi Barrani and of the 1st Libyan Division now retiring from Maktila through which Selby Force from Mersa Matruh was already advancing. The Camerons, Rajputs and Rajputana Rifles were to move up north of Tummar West facing Sidi Barrani.

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\* During the day orders were received for the 4th Indian Division to move to the Sudan—unwelcome orders at such a time.

At 5.50 a.m. the British brigade moving north-west in motor transport was shelled at short range by enemy artillery in the Sidi Barrani defences. Getting out of their lorries these British regiments fought their way onward without artillery or tank support, in some cases using their anti-tank guns to counter the enemy artillery which was firing at a range of only 1,000 yards. A considerable number of casualties were suffered, but when the "I" tanks arrived and the British artillery opened fire, the battalions soon stormed the enemy defences. One of the Tank Regiments from the Armoured Division came up along the road from Buq Buq and assisted in this attack. Over 2,000 prisoners were taken, all from the 1st Blackshirt Division, and it was noticeable that these troops did not fight nearly as well as the Italian Regulars and Libyans had done on the previous day. The Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders took heavy punishment in this battle. Lieutenant Muir, the regimental doctor, although severely wounded through the pelvis and the shoulder, and with his medical orderlies knocked out, organised a dressing post behind a low bank. Under shell and machine-gun fire he continued the work of dressing the wounded, afterwards organising a convoy of lorries to evacuate them to safety through the shelling. His own wounds were not looked to until he had seen the wounded into the main dressing station, and if ever a man earned his D.S.O. it was he.

At 4 p.m. another attack by the Queen's Royal Regiment, the Leicestershire Regiment, the Camerons and the Rajputana Rifles was made on Sidi Barrani itself. This small fishing village of about 20 small houses, had been completely destroyed in the scrapping and naval bombardments that had taken place during the

autumn Shortly after occupying the village the Italians had published the news that they had got the electric trams running in Sidi Barrani again, by such methods attempting to magnify the importance of the places they captured At 5 pm a message was received in Divisional Headquarters that British troops were in Sidi Barrani "stopping the trams"! The Italian corps commander with all his staff and many others had been captured

By nightfall the situation was very satisfactory Two brigades were on a north south line through Sidi Barrani facing east, Selby Force was moving westwards from Maktila, while another brigade faced Pt 90 Camp

That day (December 10) the enemy air force had been more active having recovered somewhat from the drastic bombing by the R A F and their heavy losses on the 9th A big dive bombing attack was carried out on the 11th Brigade during the morning, causing a few casualties In the afternoon an extremely heavy raid was carried out on Tummar West, but only three men were wounded All three of these casualties occurred when the men stood up to shout encouragement and advice to our own fighters which arrived It is believed that two enemy bombers were brought down by fire from captured enemy anti aircraft guns manned by Indian sepoy, but it was difficult to see, owing to the dense clouds of dust raised by the exploding bombs There were several other bombing and machine gun attacks during the day but the Royal Air Force kept them down to a minimum So long as a man is able to shoot back at the bomber he does not worry One Indian follower was found busy firing with a captured rifle, but as the aeroplane was then two

miles off scurrying away close to the ground, his effort was exceedingly unpopular with those in front of him.

On December 11 the plan was to round up the 1st Libyan Division and the remains of the 1st Blackshirt Division on the coast east of Sidi Barrani, while the garrison of Pt. 90 Camp was dealt with. The British brigade held Sidi Barrani facing east with one Indian brigade to the south facing north-east. On the flank were the Central India Horse making touch with Selby Force, which advanced westward, gradually closing the circle. The fighting was not severe, and by midday most resistance had stopped, though in the thick dust-storm which was again blowing it was difficult to see what was happening.

Meanwhile a flag of truce was sent to the commander of Pt. 90 Camp carried by two prisoners escorted by "I" tanks. The envoys bore a message demanding the unconditional surrender of the garrison in order to save unnecessary bloodshed. This was refused by the Italian commander, but the envoys stated that it was only done to save his honour (and the lives of his family in Italy), and that he would not resist seriously. So the attack was mounted. Again the concentration of shells descended and the tanks waddled forward, followed by the 1st Punjab Regiment. The enemy artillery replied vigorously, but when the tanks climbed into the camp they found the garrison formed up as on parade with white flags flying. Some of the Italians even had their suit-cases and kit-bags packed beside them. Some 2,000 more prisoners were collected, with the usual huge quantity of stores.

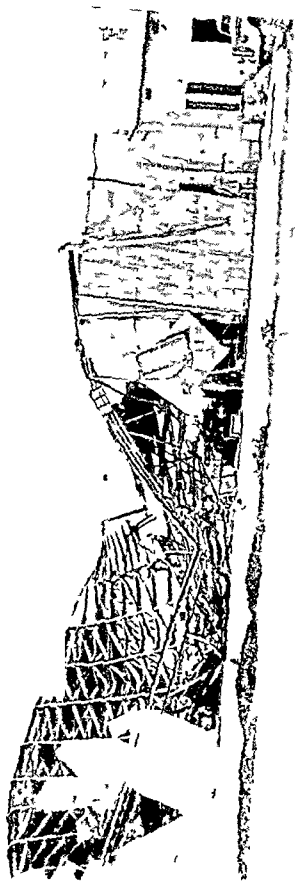
There was no time to rest after these battles. The order was given to prepare for a long move,

and before 5 p.m. the two Indian brigades, the artillery, tanks and C I H with Divisional Headquarters were on the move, leaving the British brigade and Selby Force to clear up the mess, and to reduce any points of resistance remaining. By 10 p.m. the Division was moving 25 miles away to the south west on its way to try to catch the garrisons of the Sofafi Camps before they could retire. But at this moment news was received that those positions had been abandoned and that the Armoured Division was following up, taking many prisoners. A halt was ordered, and at last everyone was able to get a little sleep. This last manoeuvre was probably the most brilliant performed by the Division, without a single written order, after three days' continuous fighting and moving in a thick duststorm, the units disengaged themselves from the aftermath of a battle, replenished with petrol, food and water, and moved through the dark for 25 miles over previously unreconnoitred country.

The share of the 4th Indian Division in the battle was now finished. On December 12 units started to move back to their old positions, while others arranged the evacuation of prisoners. It was galling to see other troops going forward to exploit the great success, especially as the move to the Sudan was a close secret. No attempt could be made to count the guns, or estimate the amount of booty captured, but the Italian food and also the Chianti made welcome additions to the hard scale of rations on which all had subsisted since December 5. Supplies of water had been captured in the camps, which supplemented the meagre ration of half a gallon a man per day, and enabled some to get the first wash for a week. This water was most unpleasant to drink as it contained a certain amount of the salted water from the cisterns. Tea







made with it had much the same effect as a dose of hot epsom salts. Everyone was incredibly dirty; the dust had matted in beards, faces were blackened with smoke, and all were weary. But all were wonderfully happy. In three days the Division had taken over 20,000 prisoners, with many guns, tanks and stores. Three enemy divisions and the Maletti Mobile Group had been utterly routed, while the Division had suffered less than 700 casualties.

The nut had been cracked. General Wavell's army swept on to Sollum, Bardia, Tobruk, Derna and Benghazi.

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Many found it difficult to realise that they had been through their first battle and won such an amazing victory. It had gone so smoothly, without a single hitch, that it seemed very like the usual manoeuvres. One sepoy, when asked how he had enjoyed the battle, replied "babut achchha scheme!"

# FOUR

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## *The Advance into Eritrea*

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THE scene now shifts to Eritrea, the oldest Italian colony. It is a curious country consisting of desert on three sides, with a well-watered plateau in the centre. Seven thousand feet up among the mountains lies Asmara, the capital, a town with a pleasant equable climate and more than 70,000 Italian inhabitants. On the coastal plain is Massawa, a well developed and strongly defended port and one of the hottest places on earth. As the harbour was protected by many miles of coral reef an attack from the sea was not possible, while the strong land defences made an advance along the coast across an almost waterless desert seem equally foolhardy. There is only one railway in Eritrea, of a gauge different to any other in the world. From Massawa this line climbs the 7,000 feet to Asmara and thence drops down 5,000 feet to Agordat. The only road from the plateau down to the western plains is at Keren, where road and railway wriggle their way through a narrow gorge into a long valley. To the traveller in the days of camel and mule transport the plateau seemed as remote and impregnable as a fastness of the gods, for the mountains rise like a great wall, grim and even threatening in the barrier they present. *Between these mountains and the Sudan Frontier*

lies an arid, almost waterless desert; dusty, flat ground lying between precipitous hills, covered with gaunt thorn scrub and tamarisk in the wadi beds, down which for three months of the year tear wild torrents to lose themselves in the sand. The climate even in the winter is hot, while in the summer it is almost unbearable. The 4th and 5th Indian Divisions, which were now to operate in this grim country, were able to overcome the rigours of the climate, mainly owing to excellent medical and hygiene arrangements.

On the arrival of the 4th Indian Division in the Sudan it was intended to attack the enemy in the Kassala and Tessenei area, thus driving the Italians out of the Sudan and making possible the re opening of the Sudan railway which had been cut by the Italian seizure of Kassala. Early in January it became clear, however, that the enemy was preparing to retire from his exposed positions and that he was in fact already thinning out. Although the date originally fixed for the attack was February 8, and the arrival of the 4th Division had been arranged to fit in with that date, it was suddenly decided to advance on January 19.

The 4th Division was far from ready by this date. In the Gash Delta was Headquarters with the mobile Gazelle Force, which was now placed under this division, some artillery and part of one brigade. The 14th Punjab Regiment had not yet arrived. The 11th Sikh Regiment joined Gazelle and were supplied with lorries to make them as mobile as the remainder of this little force, but the other brigade was only just beginning to arrive at Gedaref, and would not be concentrated for another fortnight. The 5th Division on the other hand was ready, although one brigade was still down at Gallabat.

*The Action at Keru*

On January 19 the advance began. The enemy was found to have evacuated both Kassala and Tessenei during the previous 48 hours, and so both forces set off in pursuit. The 5th Division pushed along the fine motor road to Aicota, while the 4th Division advanced along the dry weather track towards Keru. Both columns were delayed by road mines, obstructions and demolitions prepared by the Italians, and our Sappers and Miners had their first taste of the dangerous and trying work of clearing the roads. By the afternoon Gazelle caught up with the enemy at Wachai, some 40 miles from Kassala, and at once engaged them, the Sikhs\* having their first taste of fighting. During the night and early morning the enemy, who had suffered a number of casualties, abandoned Wachai, retiring towards Keru. Gazelle followed, and again caught up. This time the Italians were moving through a defile between hills, giving the gunners the type of target for which they prayed. Passing through that night, Gazelle by 4.30 a.m. on January 21, having advanced against opposition nearly 70 miles in 48 hours, made contact with the enemy in the Keru defences.

At this place the road passes through a narrow gorge more than a mile long enclosed by steep rocky mountains some 1,200 feet high. It was known that the enemy intended to make his stand there, where strong defences had been prepared; it was the first of the positions considered impregnable by the Italians—Keren, Ad Teclesan and Amba Alagi were the others.

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\* Although there are Sikhs in many other regiments, especially the Punjab Regiments and although the 11th Sikh Regiment does not consist entirely of Sikhs in this work the 11th Sikh Regiment is often referred to as "the Sikhs".

At 7 a.m. Gazelle Headquarters and a battery of British artillery were charged from the rear by a squadron of Eritrean cavalry. Out of the scrub they burst, galloping furiously, and throwing the little Italian hand grenades at anyone near. The guns were rapidly turned round and opened fire at point blank range. Gazelle Headquarters dived into their slit trenches and started to fire with everything available, even anti-tank rifles and revolvers. The charge was stopped less than 30 yards from the guns, and the few surviving cavalymen fled pursued by an armoured car. Out of the 60 men who made the charge, 25 dead and 16 wounded were left on the ground. It was a most gallant affair, but demonstrated beyond all doubt that this obsolete arm cannot be used to attack troops armed with modern weapons.

During the day the Cameron Highlanders and Rajputana Rifles had been moving up behind Gazelle along the hot airless valley, frequently being bombed, but suffering few casualties owing to the cover from view among the thorn trees. Down to the south the 5th Division occupied Aicota, and then divided. One Indian Infantry Brigade continued along the "autostrada" towards Barentu, while the other turned north east by a dry weather track to Biscia.

On the 22nd took place the first serious fight of the campaign. During the early hours of the morning the Sikhs climbed the mountain just to the south of the Keru Gorge and by daylight were on top, after hard fighting. Then it was found that the hill was separated from the main ridge by a deep valley, impossible to cross with the enemy holding the far side. Fighting continued on the hill throughout the day, while Skinner's Horse nibbled at the defences on the low ground and the Camerons arrived to help the Sikhs. By nightfall the enemy's foremost defences had been driven back and severe losses inflicted. The Italian colonial troops had fought stoutly, as they did throughout the campaign, but just before darkness there were signs that the enemy were beginning to evacuate their defences. During that night patrols kept touch, and by the morning it was found that the enemy had abandoned this almost impregnable position.

All signs of resistance having ceased by 7 a.m., Skinner's Horse attempted to enter the gorge. The road, however, had been demolished in several places, and both the road and the river bed had been heavily mined, making it impossible to get through. Working at high pressure, the Sappers and Miners methodically cleared a way, though as the mines had been cleverly laid and were most difficult to locate, this work was highly dangerous. Fortunately there had not been time for the Italians to blow all the charges, while in some cases the mines had not been buried and were lying beside the road. By 3 p.m. the Rajputana Rifles had trickled through the gorge and were following up the retreating enemy. Contact was regained in the hills to the east just before dark.

The enemy's retreat was primarily caused by the movement of the 5th Division to get astride

the lines of communication of this position, although the battering given by Gazelle had assisted. During January 23 the H.L.I., with various armoured units of the Sudan Defence Force, established themselves on a north and south line from Bahar, some 15 miles east of Keru, and by the afternoon were in touch with the enemy in the hills.

On January 24 the first major defeat of the Italian forces in Eritrea took place, when the five Colonial battalions cut off in the Keru hills were smashed. After considerable fighting all day the H.L.I. assisted by the 10th Baluch Regiment,\* inflicted severe casualties on the enemy and captured over 700 prisoners including the brigade commander and all his staff. Gazelle and the Rajputana Rifles collected another three hundred. Although a portion of the enemy managed to escape through the scrub, none got back as formed bodies. The Italian Colonial Brigade was so broken that it was not used for any further fighting during the campaign, until it was met and finally annihilated at Ad Teclesan.

### *The Pursuit to Agordat*

Gazelle followed by the Camerons, Rajputana Rifles and the 14th Punjab Regiment, who had caught up after being bombed in the train from Haiya, now pushed on taking little part in the fight. Biscia, some 35 miles from Keru, was reached by 10 a.m. and the enemy abandoning their positions were hurried out by this mobile little force. Throughout the day the enemy aircraft continued their bombing, and so great had been the speed of the advance that the R.A.F. added its quota of

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\* Often referred to as "the Baluchis".



bombs on the long suffering Gazelle, fortunately with little effect.

By 1 p.m. next day the main defences covering Agordat on the Biscia Road had been contacted, while the autostrada had been cut some six miles from the town. On this road two large convoys of motor lorries were intercepted, over 100 prisoners and more than 20 vehicles being captured. Just before dark five enemy medium tanks attacked in this area. In this first action with tanks in the campaign, the enemy were driven off with the loss of one and another badly damaged.

At nightfall the Rajputana Rifles arrived to assist Gazelle. This battalion had marched 60 miles in three days over heavy going, and had actually covered 120 miles in seven days. Next day the remainder of the brigade arrived and took over the rest of the front from Gazelle. At the same time a brigade of the 5th Division moved south to cut the autostrada 20 miles from Barentu. Two battles now started, the 4th Division at Agordat and the 5th at Barentu, and were fought simultaneously. For the sake of clarity they are recounted separately.

### *Preliminary Manoeuvres at Agordat*

On January 26 reconnaissances were carried out to discover the location and extent of the enemy's defences on the west of Agordat, while Gazelle attempted to get round the town to the south and cut the road to Keren. To the east of the town are high steep hills, rising 1,000 to 1,500 feet from the plain. Through these Gazelle was unable to find a way and so withdrew to make an attempt to the north. That was also found impossible owing to steep scrub-covered hills,

which the enemy were holding in strength Agordat is a small town, with an Italian quarter on low hills overlooking the remainder, lying on the south bank of the River Barak, which at this time was a wide, dry, sandy bed, lined on either side by a thick palm forest. South west of the town is a long, steep ridge named Laquetat, on either end of which are forts. Between Laquetat and Mt Cochen to the east lies a rolling plain covered with thorn scrub, while just to the south east of the town are four hills strongly fortified. The garrison consisted of some Blackshirts and three brigades, including the 2nd Brigade of five battalions which had fought well in British Somaliland and was considered the star Colonial Brigade in Italian East Africa.

January 27 saw a further step in 4th Division's concentration, for the second Brigade was brought up in lorries all the way from Kassala. However, it was not yet complete, for the other battalion of the Rajputana Rifles had still to join. The original date by which the concentration of this brigade was to have been completed at Gedaref was February 5, but actually it finished its concentration at Agordat, in face of the enemy, five days earlier, and 250 miles further forward. It was a great feat of organisation, entailing much extra work especially on the part of the R I A S C.

The enemy confined his activities to spasmodic shelling but there were frequent, though not heavy, *bombing and machine gun attacks from the air*. As had been previously experienced in the Western Desert and at Kassala the Italians never sent out any patrols either to gain information or to harass the forward troops. The Division took advantage of this on January 28 when the 1st Punjab Regiment and the Sikhs worked their way forward

towards Laquetat without meeting any opposition. The 14th Punjab Regiment trickled forward across the plain towards Mt Cochen and by six o'clock in the evening had established themselves on top without being fired upon. The Rajputana Rifles and the Camerons followed across the plain, and by nightfall these three battalions were established on the flank of the enemy position, while the advance on Laquetat pinned the enemy's attention to his front.

During the night the 1st Punjab Regiment and the Sikhs advanced on Laquetat with orders to seize it if possible, but not to incur casualties. The battalions found that the hill was strongly held, and withdrew. One company of the Sikhs actually got up onto the hill, though not into the fort itself, but was also brought back at daybreak. These battalions were then quietly moved from this sector, which was taken over by Gazelle, and slipped across to join the others below Mt Cochen. A few "I" tanks also arrived during the day and by the evening the 4th Division was concentrated ready to attack on the weakest flank of the enemy position.

### *The Fight on Mt Cochen*

Meanwhile, however, the situation had changed on Mt Cochen. This steep mountain rises about 1,500 feet from the plain. It is covered with thin scrub and hidden in clouds every morning until about 9 a.m. Once the top is reached it can be seen that it stretches for about two miles in steep knife edge ridges and gullies as far as the gorge through which runs the motor road to Keren. To the south east a tumbled mass of rugged hills stretches as far as the eye can see. During the previous night the enemy had brought back at least

two battalions and throughout the day heavy, confused fighting had taken place on top. The Rajputana Rifles were sent up to join the 14th Punjab Regiment and the brigadier with a skeleton headquarters took command on the peak. A force with no animal transport like this division was at a disadvantage in mountain warfare. There were no mules to carry up supplies, and guns could not be got up the hills to give that close support which is so necessary in this type of fighting.\* One company from each battalion was employed on carrying water, food and ammunition to the top of the mountain, and a company of Bengal Sappers and Miners assisted.

The obscure situation on Mt. Cochen delayed the attack next morning. It became necessary to clear the enemy from the foothills, especially from the low ridge, which was named "Gibraltar", standing out into the plain for nearly half a mile and barring progress like a wall. The Camerons attacked this, and after much fighting took it, beating off counter attacks during the afternoon. But up on Mt. Cochen severe fighting was taking place and the two Indian battalions were hard pressed. The enemy had by now brought back five battalions from his defences to the area of Mt. Cochen and attacks were made from the north-west, north-east and even south-east. Pack guns also had been taken up and our troops were given a very hard time. During the afternoon a heavy attack on the Rajputana Rifles was driven off, but with the enemy getting guns in the rear of the position, the brigadier decided to withdraw a short

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\*For mountain warfare a gun, which can be taken to pieces and carried on mules, is necessary. The 4th Indian Division was equipped with 25-pounder Field Guns, which have proved the outstanding artillery weapon of the war, but which cannot be carried up mountains.

distance and re organise In this extraordinarily tangled country the situation had become very confused, with small local fights proceeding in many different places During the early hours of darkness a retirement was successfully carried out to an area overlooked by the main peak, but covered from the enemy positions to the north and north east The movement was not without exciting incidents The commanding officer, signalling officer and two sepoy of the Rajputana Rifles when carrying back a wounded Indian signaller were followed up by some of the enemy who got within 30 yards The party managed to get back, although unfortunately the signaller died The brigadier and commanding officer re organised the battalions, who were still full of fight after their gruelling time The companies carrying up supplies were terribly tired, but after a short rest continued their distressing work These men had a task which carried no glory or excitement, soul destroying, utterly boring, back breaking and yet dangerous work But to them was largely due the success gained in the battle

Before dawn the Rajputana Rifles, 14th Punjab and the Sappers and Miners attacked again They gained the peak, forced the enemy back, and advanced towards the main road A party of Sappers and Miners and 14th Punjab Regiment, 20 men of each, put in a most spirited bayonet charge on a large party of the enemy Afterwards in that place 100 Colonial and four Italian dead were counted, which gives some idea of the fury of this charge by men from the Punjab The fight in the clouds on the mountain was now over, the enemy troops were seen to be retreating Leaving the Rajputana Rifles to mop up, the 14th Punjab Regiment and the Sappers

and Miners withdrew. This fierce battle enabled the main attack on the plain to take place that day without serious interference. The Rajputana Rifles had fought like heroes, while the company of Bengal Sappers and Miners deserve special mention.

# FIVE

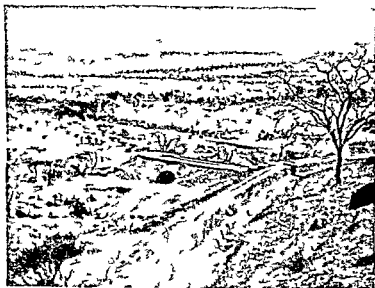
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## *The Battles of Agordat and Barentu*

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### *Agordat*

IT is twenty minutes past five in the morning. The thin mist is just beginning to show grey in the first light of the dawn. From the heights of Mt. Cochen the sounds of battle, the sharp crack of rifle shots, the rattle of machine-guns, the harsher explosions of grenades, come dully to the ears, deadened by the thick blanket of fog that envelops the peak. The plain is strangely quiet. From the back areas the blurred hum of motor engines blends with the dim early morning light, and adds to the tenseness as zero hour is awaited. Suddenly our artillery opens. The overhanging cloud is lit with dull orange flashes from the guns and bursting shells. The noise reverberates among the hills till it sounds like one continuous peal of thunder. The Camerons slip down the wall of Gibraltar and toil their way along the foothills, down into the gullies and up the precipitous little ridges. The enemy is shaken; he cannot stand the threat of the bayonet; the Camerons make their way on, mopping up nests of enemy until they get round the north-western shoulder of Mt. Cochen,



Looking across the plain from the Fort on Laquetat towards Mount Cochen. The wall of Gibraltar can be seen stretching out into the plain from the far mountains.



Sappers and Miners clearing a track for the porters up on Mount Cochen.





Some of the tanks captured at Agordat.

looking across a plain, thinly covered with scrub, to the main road, the Italians' only line of retreat.

Meanwhile the artillery has changed its target. It now pours its torrent of shells into the line of trenches stretching across the plain from Laquetat. As it does so the engines of the four "I" tanks, which have been gently purring, roar into life. Across the flat plain they crawl, crushing trees in their progress, tipping down into the little water-courses and climbing ponderously out on the far side. The infantry armoured carriers follow behind, like piglets scurrying after the old sow. Behind again come the Royal Fusiliers, grim-faced, bearded under their steel helmets. As the tanks approach the enemy line the fire becomes intense so that it is impossible to distinguish individual shots. The continuous rattle sounds as if a whole school of small boys were running their sticks along an iron paling. The tanks reach the line. The enemy's fire begins to die down. The Fusiliers come in with the bayonet. The fighting is fierce, but our men are fiercest. The news comes back "the position is ours". Once again our combination of artillery, tanks and matchless infantry has gained the day. The enemy's line is broken and the 4th Division is threatening the only route by which the Italians can withdraw their guns and wheeled vehicles.

But the battle is not yet won. There is still fight left in the enemy. From the Camerons comes the news that in front of them they have seen tanks and infantry apparently preparing to counter attack. They also proudly report that they have knocked out an Italian medium tank with one shot from an anti-tank rifle; a report received with some scepticism but afterwards proved to be correct. At once the "I" tanks are recalled from the front of

the Fusiliers; three return but the fourth is enjoying itself and cannot be found. At 10 a.m. the three tanks with seven infantry carriers in front roll round the corner of Cochen to do battle with the enemy. The carriers are acting as bait to entice the enemy tanks into action—and they succeed. Out onto the plain come ten medium and eight light tanks intent on the easy prey of seven little carriers. Then from the scrub burst the three "I" tanks, and the battle is on. It is not much of a fight; in a few minutes six medium and five light tanks are knocked out, many blazing. Great pillars of dark, greasy smoke shoot up with flames from which come loud reports as the ammunition explodes. On roll our monsters into the valleys running up to the hills. Here they find a Blackshirt battalion ready to attack. The Fascists break and run; if they climb into the hills they are safe, but in their panic they fly along the valley bottom. They are shot down by the dozen. The Camerons following up collect the remainder and the 150th Blackshirt Battalion ceases to exist. While the infantry press on towards the road, the tanks return for the next phase of the attack.

The 1st Punjab Regiment now takes the stage. They have to capture the four hills astride the road just outside the town which their commanding officer names Tinker, Tailor, Soldier and Sailor. They are fortified with concrete emplacements, trenches and wire and the commanding officer is told that he must get them and hang onto them throughout the night whatever may happen. At 2.30 p.m. the Punjabis start across the plain, leaving the Fusiliers watching Laquetat on their left and the Camerons on their right.

Regiment is on Tinker and Tailor mopping up the dug-outs and organising their defences in preparation for a sticky night.

The enemy, however, has had enough. With his line of communication cut and his main position turned, he makes haste to get away what he can before all his forward troops are "put in the bag". In the evening light men can be seen coming down off Laquetat and running across the plain, and the R.A.F. reports that the Cochen Gorge is choked with men and vehicles. Night falls, pitch dark and the armoured cars of the Sudan Defence Force are unable to find a way into Agordat across the many gullies. Two "I" tanks are sent into the gorge with orders to do as much damage as possible. This they do and chaos reigns in the narrow pass. The rout is complete.

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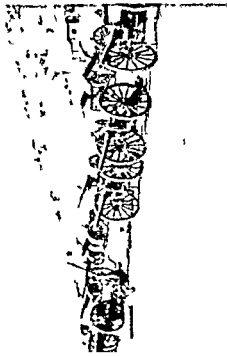
Next day at first light the Division went into the town, which was found abandoned. The enemy had slipped away by a track to the north of the River Baraka, leaving all his guns, vehicles, and huge quantities of stores. About a thousand prisoners had been taken and this number was doubled when the pursuing forces overtook stragglers. It had been a great victory, brought about by a brilliant manœuvre. The enemy's strong positions were turned and his line of retirement cut. All troops, both British and Indian, had shown their greatest fighting qualities in a struggle which was never easy. As an example, the enemy Colonial Battalion which was smashed by the Fusiliers was thought to be finished. Yet ten days later it was fighting stoutly at Keren and continued to do so throughout that six weeks' battle. And that battalion was considered the worst in the 2nd Italian Colonial Brigade.

*Barentu*

Round Barentu a very different type of battle was taking place. There, there was no opportunity for wide manœuvre. The enemy, though not as numerous as at Agordat, had better ground to defend. It was a grim soldiers' battle in which the better men won by sheer fighting ability.

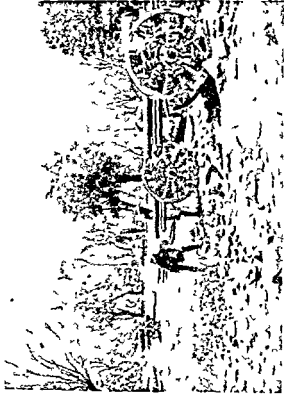
Barentu is another town very similar to Agordat, lying on a small plain surrounded by steep, scrub-covered hills. One brigade of the 5th Division was advancing from Aicota, the other from Agordat; the only possible line of retreat left to the Italians was by a road running westward. But this road fades out 25 miles from Barentu, and there is no way up the escarpment except for men and animals. Retirement would mean the loss of all guns, vehicles and stores, so the Italians had no alternative but to stand and fight it out.

On January 27 one brigade advanced southwards along the Agordat autostrada. About eight miles from Barentu opposition was encountered. At this point the road climbs up to a pass through the hills surrounding the town, and the enemy had completely blocked it to a great depth by rolling down huge masses of rock from the overhanging hills. The commanding heights and the lower features as well were held by the enemy. Next day the smaller bumps near the road were taken, enabling work on removing the blocks to be begun, but on this and on subsequent days stiff fighting took place. The enemy would be cleared from one feature, but there were always other positions behind in this hilly intricate country. It is not possible to recount any particular phase in this battle, in which the enemy was slowly driven back to within three miles of Barentu. Each battalion was continually taking part in small attacks, while



Cann captured at Agorlat





"At the foot of the escarpment were found guns, lorries and stores, for the Italians, unable to get them up onto the plateau had had to abandon them all"

the Sappers and Miners worked like heroes at the many road blocks, frequently under fire.

*The Fighting on the Aicota Road*

On the road from Tessenei the other brigade was fighting its way forward gradually. Opposed by the best part of two brigades, who took up a series of positions very roughly 15 miles apart, it had to fight four separate actions. The first was on January 21, when a Colonial Brigade was evicted from a strong position astride the road by the 13th Frontier Force Rifles as a result of a wide movement round the flank. On January 25 the brigade bumped the enemy again in an even stronger position. Next day a pre-dawn attack was not successful, for although the 2nd Punjab Regiment managed to get on to its objective, it was heavily counter attacked on one flank while its other flank was exposed owing to the Worcesters having lost their way in the dark. Next day a further attack was put in, and, although only partially successful, so shook the enemy that they retired during the night. On January 28 yet another action had to be fought. The 13th Frontier Force Rifles again did an out-flanking movement which this time did not fully achieve its object. Later in the day, however, the 2nd Punjab Regiment carried out a successful turning manœuvre round the other flank and the enemy was once more forced to retire.

Contact was regained next day when the enemy was found to be holding most intricate and scrub-covered country some six miles from Barentu, the last possible position before the open plain surrounding the town was reached. Fighting against the position continued for three days, the enemy resisting most stubbornly and being with difficulty driven back step by step. On February



1, the day on which Agordat fell, the two brigades of 5th Division were exhausted and it appeared that Barentu would not fall until further reinforcements were received. But the enemy had been feeling the pressure severely and the news of the fall of Agordat was too much for him. Patrols, on the morning of February 2, found that the Italians had abandoned their defences and Barentu fell.

During the advance along the road from Aicota, the Sappers and Miners had had much to do. In rear of each and any position the road had been very thoroughly mined, and as movement of vehicles off the road in this area was seldom possible, considerable delay was imposed. Although it was not so difficult to detect the mines as it had been on the dusty Keru track, it was a tedious job rendering them harmless. It is said that on one occasion the Sappers and Miners worked with such speed all through the night, that when dawn broke they had nearly caught up with the enemy. Only 300 yards ahead was a party of Italian Sappers busily laying mines!

The Worcestershire Regiment, 2nd Punjab Regiment and 13th Frontier Force Rifles\* had fought very well in pushing across the difficult and scrubby country. The total casualties suffered by the 5th Division during the advance were 434 killed, wounded and slightly wounded. This was heavier than those incurred at Agordat, but was not severe considering the large amount of hard fighting that had taken place. Later, when the 4th Division was to take over 1,500 casualties

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\*The 12th Frontier Force Regiment and 13th Frontier Force Rifles, together with several other units are frequently known as "The Piffers". The nickname originated in the days when these units formed part of the Punjab Frontier Force.

in the first Battle of Keren, it was realised that our forces had got off very lightly, but at the time the losses seemed unpleasantly large. Throughout the campaign the proportion of lightly wounded was high. If a man when assaulting one of these boulder strewn hills were to fall and cut himself badly he had to be evacuated for fear of the wound turning septic. He would thus be shown as a casualty but in a fortnight he would be back with his unit perfectly fit.

In Barentu only the wounded in the hospitals abandoned by the Italians were taken prisoner, but in following up along the road to the east, a Motor Machine Gun Company of the Sudan Defence Force picked up many exhausted stragglers both Italian and Eritrean. Some guns, vehicles and considerable quantities of stores were found in the town, and the booty was greatly increased when the pursuing troops reached the mountains. Below the precipitous wall lay all the guns, ammunition and stores, for, unable to get anything except men and animals up the mountains, the enemy had had to abandon everything else. Chased by our armoured cars and mobile troops, continually bombed from the air, this enemy force was utterly disorganised. Over 3,000 prisoners were taken. Many of the native troops went off to their homes, and their units although afterwards reformed were never fit to be taken into action again. It had been a very complete victory.

### *Um Hager*

While the battles at Agordat and Barentu were taking place, one of the battalions of the 5th Mahratta Light Infantry (usually known as "the Mahrattas") was having a campaign all on its own. This battalion, together with French Spahis and some small Sudan Defence Force

units, were watching the Italian garrison at Um Hager where together with internal security troops the enemy strength approached two brigades. Um Hager lies at the border junction of the Sudan, Abyssinia and Eritrea. The advance in the north threatened to cut off this post so the Italian commander decided to withdraw from the isolated valley. Followed up by the Mahrattas the Italians began to retreat on January 25. It may have been "according to plan" but it was certainly not carried out "in good order", for in addition to collecting a few prisoners, our troops found much equipment, including 75 lorries in good condition, abandoned in the area. These Mahrattas had also the rare distinction of capturing a gold mine, with all its machinery in full working order, normally employing 50 Italians and 2,000 native workers.

### *Gallabat*

One Indian Infantry Brigade was still at Gallabat watching the enemy at Metemma. The enemy retired in early February towards Gondar, and his retreat was very well carried out. Long stretches of the road were mined and destroyed, the blocks being regularly covered by fire from small rearguards. The Indians could make but slow progress in spite of the gallant work of the Sappers and Miners. It was for his outstanding courage and endurance in clearing a way through these mines that 2nd Lieutenant Premindra Singh Bhagat was awarded the Victoria Cross, the first awarded to the Indian Army in this war and the first ever won by an Indian Commissioned Officer. All the Sappers and Miners in both divisions could be proud of this recognition of the tedious, dangerous work which they carried out often at night, frequently under fire and always at a speed which increased the risk.

# SIX

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## *The First Fights at Keren*

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ONCE more we return to the 4th Indian Division. Late in the evening of Friday, January 31, Gazelle came forward to go in pursuit of the flying Italians, although Agordat had not been then occupied. At first light the force moved through the Cochen Gorge and started off along the motor road to Keren, some 60 miles away. The gorge presented a scene of great disorder. Dead and wounded lay along the road, lorries still smouldered and great heaps of ammunition and supplies were dumped in the scrub. By 8 a.m. Skinner's Horse reached the Ponte Mussolini (later rechristened the Ponte Platt) 15 miles from Agordat, a great steel bridge of four spans over the River Baraka. Although it had not collapsed, several girders had been cut by explosive charges and it was unusable. The approaches on both sides had been heavily mined, as had also the dry bed of the river, which is sandy and almost impassable to motors. It took eight hours for Gazelle to get across the river, and

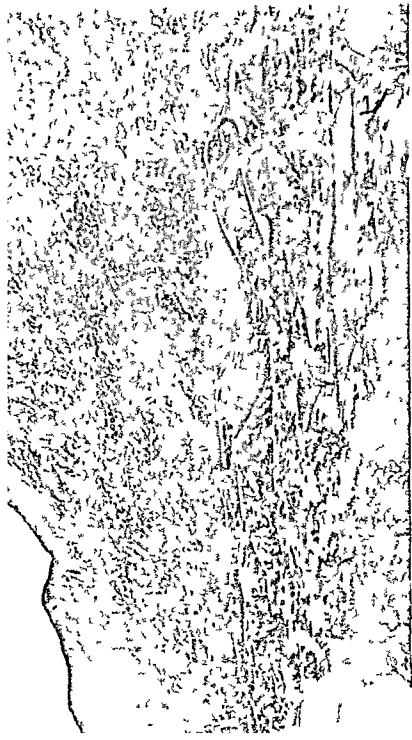
get any wheeled vehicle up. In five miles the road rises 1,500 feet and is cut on the steep side of the mountains like the hill roads of India. Two hundred yards of road had been blown down into the gorge and in two places the hill above had fallen down forming complete obstacles.

On Monday the tanks, in an attempt to get past the block, gave covering fire to men who tried to clear the road, but the task proved impossible. There was no other way up these mountains. The cavalry searched all along the foothills, but far to the north and far to the south a forbidding impassable wall forbade all wheeled movement. The 4th Division had come to the place which the Italians had always confidently said would make it impossible to capture Asmara from the west.

One brigade remained in the Agordat area, mopping up on Mt Cochen, collecting the booty and organising the town, where the inhabitants had had a glorious night of looting before the arrival of our troops. The victors of Cochen moved up to join Gazelle on Sunday, marching and being ferried in all available lorries, and the next day an attempt was made to scale the mountains to the west of the Keren Gorge.

The surroundings of Keren are grim and forbidding. The road winds up the narrow Ascidera Valley with rocky precipitous mountains on either side gradually closing in. But before the end is reached a narrow ravine enters from the north east. This is the famous Dongolans Gorge down which come the railway and the road from the plateau. To the east is the pinnacle of Dologorodoc with a fort on top, while to the west stands the vast bulk of Mt Sanchil towering 1 000 feet higher. Behind Dologorodoc rise the two great massifs of Zeban and Falestoh, while to the





Cameron Ridge

north of the valley are great mountains running up to the peaks of Amba, Sammana and Beit Gabru. The Italians appeared to be justified in their claim that Keren was impregnable. During the time that the 4th Division remained in the valley, every place got a name, many of which will go down in history. Cameron Ridge, Sikh Spur, Rajputana Ridge were named after regiments which fought on them. Sugar Loaf, Pimple, Pinnacle, Hog's Back give some indication of the shape of the features, Hell Fire Corner richly deserved its historic name, while the desolate Scescilembi Valley was in grim humour named the Happy Valley.

### *Cameron Ridge*

On Tuesday reconnaissances were made and next day the attack started. The Camerons fought their way up onto a ridge below the main Sanchil feature, inflicting heavy casualties on Italian and Colonial troops. 2nd Lieutenant J. A. Cockrane was awarded the DSO for great bravery, he had already won the MC for valour at Maktila. From prisoners it was discovered that the Savoy Grenadier Division had arrived from Addis Ababa only two days before, this regular division of picked men, including Bersaglieri and Alpini, had the finest troops in Italian East Africa, and throughout they fought well.

The 14th Punjab Regiment now seized Brigadier's Peak without much opposition, and for the first time our troops were able to look down into the pleasant Keren Valley and the white buildings of the town itself. Brigadier's Peak, later shortened to Brig's Peak, was the scene of much bitter fighting during the next seven weeks. Five times our troops attacked across the dividing ravine, up the boulder strewn





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precipitous slopes from Cameron Ridge 1,000 feet below, and four times they captured it. On three occasions they were unable to hold it. The 14th Punjab Regiment held the position until the next morning, when they were driven off by a counter attack. The Rajputana Rifles, who were on their way to assist them and the Camerons held on to Cameron Ridge against strong assaults. The 1st Punjab Regiment also arrived from Agordat.

Cameron Ridge was a difficult place to defend. It was commanded from the heights above, in front, from the flanks and even rear, while all supplies, water, food and ammunition had to be carried up 1,500 feet of rocky steep slopes to the troops on top. And yet it had to be held, for if it were lost no attack could be mounted with the least hope of success. It was held by a desperate defence. Repeated counter attacks were launched during the next ten days to be driven back by most gallant and in some cases individual efforts. Lance Naik Bhaira Ram of the Rajputana Rifles, a youngster just promoted, after a whole day of continuous shelling and constant attacks was left in command of a platoon reduced to seven men. A night attack followed, so heavy that a neighbouring platoon was overrun and the whole brunt of the assault came on Bhaira Ram's tiny post. Not only did he drive off this attack and another, but with his remaining two men chased the retiring enemy with the bayonet. When all was over 11 enemy lay dead just outside his post and many more littered the hill side. Other tales of equal gallantry could be told but this serves to show how these British and Indian troops clung onto the exposed ridge and yet, when the time came were able to climb the hills above and capture them from a strongly entrenched enemy.

set for the attack on Acqua Col at dawn on February 12.

The night of February 11-12 was an exceedingly trying one for General Beresford Pierse. At 8 p.m. information was received that a new enemy Colonial Brigade was down in the Baraka Valley some 25 miles away to the south, making towards the Ponte Mussolini 35 miles in rear of the Division. At midnight came a report that enemy tanks had been met only a dozen miles from the bridge, and at 2.30 a.m. the grave tidings came back that the 1st Punjab Regiment had been counter-attacked and driven off Brig's Peak with heavy casualties. In order to balance this the Mahrattas were withdrawn from the Happy Valley to support the battalions on Cameron Ridge, but this jeopardised the success of the attack on the Acqua Col.

The C.I.H.\* which had rejoined the Division two days previously, and which had already one squadron down watching the Baraka Valley, were sent off with some "I" tanks to oppose the enemy brigade. Next day further information was received that that brigade had started to retire towards Asmara. This Colonial Brigade was entirely equipped with mule transport and was thus able to get down the escarpment. There can be no doubt that if 4th Division had had only one brigade on a pack transport basis, Keren would have fallen in the first week. For the first time the mobility of mechanisation was a disadvantage.

The story of the enemy tanks gives an example of the difficulties that may arise in mobile war over such large areas. An R.A.F. wireless interception set had been sent down the valley to

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\* The Central India Horse is usually known by its initials, in the same way that the Highland Light Infantry are often alluded to as "the H.L.I."

give warning of the approach of enemy aircraft to Agordat and there the crew had fired at what they suspected to be enemy. A patrol of the C.I.H. under a Naik, hearing the firing set off in two armoured carriers to investigate. The R.A.F. wireless crew, who had never seen a carrier before, slipped away back to Agordat and gave the alarm that they had been attacked by Italian tanks. The patrol of the C.I.H., who had seen the R.A.F. and knew of their position, carried on with their patrol, thinking nothing of the encounter.

### *Failure*

The 1st Punjab Regiment had suffered severely on Brig's Peak. The counter attack had come in from the left and rear, rolling up the position. The acting commanding officer was killed, two company commanders had already been evacuated wounded and a third had been wounded and captured. In the three companies and headquarters more than 280 casualties were incurred. The artillery observation posts had been lost, and this was serious in view of the attack due to start at first light.

In spite of the change for the worse in the situation, the attack started at 5.30 a.m. The Rajputana Rifles attacked the mountain to the left of the Acqua Col under cover of a heavy artillery bombardment. The companies climbed up the hill, but when they were still 200 feet from the top the artillery had to stop. In every attack it was this last 200 feet that was the difficulty. So steep were the hills that it was frequently hand and foot work, and it was not possible to see the enemy on the top. The ridges were knife edges. During the artillery bombardment the enemy troops were concealed in safety on the reverse slope, but as soon





Looking across the Asadera Valley from Pt 1710 Here our positions were overlooked on three sides and the artillery positions in the valley could all be seen from the enemy's observation posts

as the artillery lifted they came to the top and showered grenades on the climbing troops. With the light Italian grenades it was possible to hit a man 60 yards away, and it was amazing that any troops managed to reach the top. A few of the Rajputana Rifles did manage to get there but these gallant men were not able to hold the position. The others, unable to get on, obstinately refused to retire, and opened fire on any target that presented itself. Meanwhile the Sikhs attacked the Sphinx on the other side of the Col, with the same result. One platoon managed to get in with the bayonet, and did great execution, but it became clear that the enemy were too strong, and both battalions were withdrawn.

The extra brigade from 5th Division was only lent to the 4th Division for exploiting beyond the Col, and so the attack was called off. Both the Sikhs and the Rajputana Rifles had fought magnificently under conditions that were as difficult as any that can be imagined. Frequent references have been made to the *similarity of the fighting in Eritrea to the mountain warfare on the North West Frontier of India* and the implied suitability of the Indian troops for this type of fighting. There are mountains in both these countries, but there the similarity ends. Give the Pathan unlimited modern rifles and ammunition, equip him with hand grenades, machine guns, mortars, artillery, and aeroplanes and let him have barbed wire to strengthen the tops of his hills, then take away the mule transport and pack guns with which our troops are equipped on the frontier and conditions would be more alike. Yet these two battalions nearly achieved the impossible, indeed the attack might have succeeded, had it not been necessary to remove the Mahrattas to the Cameron Ridge position. The Italians made no counter



attacks and it was afterwards learned that they had lost many men. In fact the Duke of Aosta later admitted that his troops were at their last gasp. Had one more push then been possible Keren would have fallen.

The extra brigade slipped out of the valley that night and returned to the Tessenei area, where the 5th Division was now training in fighting among the hills. Later the brigade from Gallabat joined that Division and the whole went through a course of intensive training, mainly physical, for the great assault of Keren. This stood them in good stead, especially in the capture of Dologorodoe Fort in March.

### *The Period of Waiting*

Meanwhile the 4th Division clung onto its positions in the valley before Keren. The troops were withdrawn from the Happy Valley, and after two days' rest relieved those on Cameron Ridge. That brigade then had its first rest since leaving Haiya on January 12, five weeks during which they had advanced 380 miles, 180 against opposition. They had fought two major battles, had rarely had enough sleep, and had had no opportunity for washing either their bodies or clothes. Filthy, bearded, tired, they had well earned a rest, yet within two days they were clean, smart and full of life again.

There now followed four weeks of waiting while preparations for the great assault were made. These were not weeks of peace or quiet by any means. Frequent attacks were made on the Cameron Ridge position, though there was never any serious attempt to push the defenders off. Keeping to the top of the mountain the enemy extended his line round our left flank until gun positions, headquarters and lines of supply could

all be seen. The artillery had a tough time down at the bottom of the valley. Wherever a gun was placed it was at once spotted and shelled. A second hill named Pts 1702 1710 had to be held, thus reducing the number of troops who could be resting. From the hills above even the rear slopes of Cameron Ridge could be seen. A really strong attack would surely have pushed the forward troops down into the valley and thus postponed an attack on Keren indefinitely, but the Italians were busy strengthening their positions, erecting wire, making saugars and assuring themselves that this terrible mountain fortress really was impregnable. During these four weeks the casualties from enemy action and sickness averaged over 50 a day, 1,500 for the whole period, a terrific drain on these two brigades. But our troops always had the upper hand when patrols met. Rarely did a day pass without some prisoners being brought in. It is not surprising that under these hard conditions the troops got thin and hollow cheeked. The Division had been continuously on active service, with no rest under comfortable conditions, always in the open, since the middle of August. As a subedar explained, the war had done for his figure what no amount of dieting or strenuous games had been able to do in peace.

All through the campaign it was most noticeable that the proportion of wounded to killed was very high and that the wounds were not serious. This was due to the fragmentation of the Italian bombs and grenades, which burst into many small pieces, wounding many but killing few.

The weather was growing hotter all the while. A few spots of rain fell on one or two occasions, and all wondered if the rains were going to start early, and so stop the campaign. But they held off

This period of waiting enabled the reinforcements who arrived to be assimilated into units, where they quickly absorbed the indomitable spirit of the older hands. The Camerons received drafts from a Midland Regiment, who were welcomed with open arms, being known to the Highlanders as the "Free British." The young sepoy who joined the Indian battalions, never having heard a shot fired in anger before, vied with the hardened veterans in this, the toughest fighting imaginable.

The Sappers and Miners had a strenuous time during these six weeks. All the tunnels on the steep little railway had been very thoroughly blocked by the Italians, who had removed rails and then released trucks filled with stone from the top. The resulting crashes in the tunnels would have thrilled any boy, but they were not appreciated by the troops who had to clear them, working under great difficulties in the confined space. All were cleared with the exception of Cameron Tunnel, below the ridge where the fighting was taking place.

Although a number of railway trucks had been found in Agordat, no engine had been captured. Skinner's Horse very nearly caught one, for when they reached the valley they saw the last train puffing its way up the line on the other side of the valley. But as they climbed the hill they heard the train pass above and perforce returned to the gorge empty handed. Supply to the troops on Cameron Ridge became most difficult for the enemy shelled the road frequently and heavily. Hell Fire Corner was a particularly hot spot. So the Sappers and Miners set to work to repair the railway line. An ingenious system of trains was devised. Light lorries, whose wheels fitted outside the rails, pulled trucks up to an improvised station below Hill 1702. It was not possible to reverse the

motor so it was backed up a ramp onto the truck, the brake was released and down it ran to the station in the valley. In addition an express train for senior officers was made from a trolley run by a motor cycle placed on it. The only accident on the railway, which was constantly under shell fire, was when the up express met the down goods, though the former was rapidly put into reverse the passengers had the horrifying experience of watching the truck gaining on them while they were unable to jump off owing to the sheer cliff over which they would fall. Fortunately the damage done was small, and the Sappers and Miners soon had the line working again.

The R I A S C have a job which does not often bring them into the limelight. Long, long hours of driving their heavy lorries on indifferent roads and normally in thick clouds of dust is their lot. During the advance to Agordat they had to drive 120 miles each day over a track which grew steadily worse. It says much for the high standard of driving, that few lorries broke down under this gruelling test, and supplies never failed to arrive. The fighting troops were loud in the praise of the R I A S C, and that is the only type of praise appreciated by these drivers.

During the period of waiting there was much work for the administrative staff and services. In addition to the normal supply of food, ammunition and stores, the bringing up of reinforcements and the evacuation of the large numbers of prisoners, dumps had to be made forward not only for the 4th Division but also in anticipation of the arrival of the 5th Division. The work was very heavy and no men could be spared for rest. The success of the operations was in large part due to the unremitting toil of the supply services.

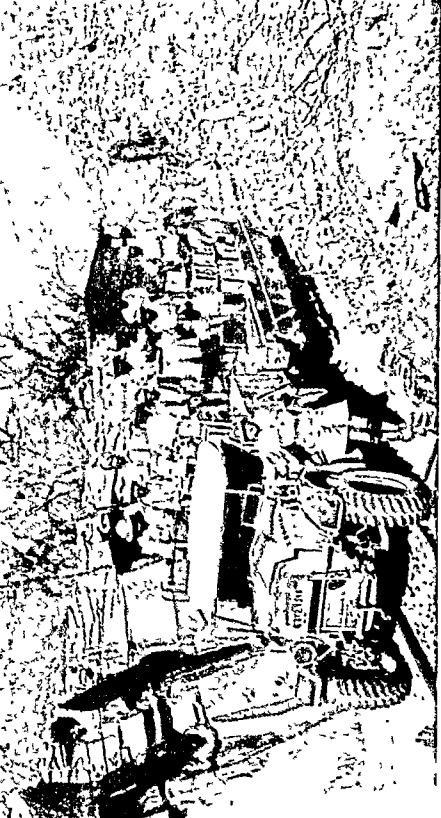
After the battle on the Acqua Col the enemy air force rarely troubled the 4th Division. The R A F established complete air supremacy, enemy planes seldom even appearing over Keren. This was a great relief for although the casualties inflicted by bombing and machine gunning were small, it is exceedingly trying being attacked by someone to whom no answer can be made. Captured Italian anti aircraft guns augmented our own and were a further deterrent to the Savoias, Capronis and Fiats.

### *The Red Sea Littoral*

Early in February Briggs Force started to advance down the Red Sea coast. Composed of the Royal Sussex Regiment, the 16th Punjab Regiment, a battalion of the French Foreign Legion and another of Senegalese commanded by Free French officers, this column had a difficult task in front of it. There is little water in the area, roads are non-existent, the heat is great and the sand makes movement of motor vehicles hazardous.

While the advance from Kassila was in progress the Royal Sussex had been carrying out a bluff. Dummy camps and dumps were erected, piers improved, dummy aerodromes marked out, and the general impression given that considerable forces were present and making ready to move forward. These preparations produced almost daily bombing attacks by the enemy, who was completely misled. An attempt was made to take advantage of the confusion and capture Karora on the frontier, but when the advance was delayed owing to difficulties in the sand the element of surprise was lost and so the regiment withdrew.

When the advance did start the Royal Sussex quickly captured Karora, Mersa Taclai and





The gunners had a tough time Down in the valley their positions could be seen as soon as they fired

Elghena, about 30 miles inland from the coast, against small opposition, though about 100 prisoners and some war material were captured. Mersa Taclai, a tiny bay with a gap in the long coral reef, was of great importance, for it provided a sea base for further operations thus eliminating much of the sandy wastes near the frontier. The 180 miles from Port Sudan to Elghena was so bad in parts that motor transport consumed more than twice the normal amount of petrol, a most important factor on such long lines of communications. Even the capture of Taclai did not solve *all supply problems as it was devoid of water and* the first 25 miles to Elghena were almost impassable, a road had to be constructed immediately. Moreover, there were few boats, mostly Arab dhows, to carry supplies and troops from Suakim and Port Sudan.

The Royal Sussex pushed on to Cub Cub, 80 miles from Elghena, where they came up against an enemy position in the hills. The Foreign Legion arrived to help, and moved round in rear of the town, but lost its way in the unmapped country. This had an amusing result. Four enemy tanks hurrying up to reinforce the garrison, encountered this force, and thinking that Cub Cub had fallen hastily withdrew.

The Royal Sussex and Foreign Legion launched their attack on this well entrenched position on February 21, and by the evening of the next day had broken the enemy's stubborn resistance. Over 400 prisoners were taken and some guns, and the advance at once continued. By the next evening Chelamet was occupied before the enemy had time to destroy the pass. Now the force was among the big hills on the edge of the plateau, the vehicles being confined to the one indifferent road.



Twenty miles on from Chelamet, the enemy was found to be holding the Mescelit Pass only 15 miles from Keren. The 16th Punjab Regiment came up from Mersa Taclai and on March 1 assaulted the precipitous hills on either side. The attack was completely successful and the battalion pushed on until held up by the northern defences of Keren. This phase had been completed in 25 days, entailing an advance of over 200 miles against three lines of defences and under acute transport difficulties which were greatly accentuated by the serious lack of water until Cub Cub was reached.

The next phase was to assist in the reduction of Keren. The force was not strong enough, particularly in artillery, to stage a full-scale attack, but it was important to contain as large enemy forces on this front as possible. As these operations were to take place among high mountains without roads and at best only a few camel tracks, further transport problems arose; new tracks were made, old ones repaired and 600 camels collected locally, so that by March 15 all was ready for strong demonstrations against the enemy's defences.

# SEVEN

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## *The Battle of Keren*

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THE assault on Keren began on March 15. During the six weeks that the 4th Indian Division had been in the Ascidera Valley, the enemy had been busy strengthening his already very strong defences. All the way from the Acqua Col, past Falestoh, Dologorodoc, Sanchil, Sammana, to Beit Gabru, wire had been erected varying in thickness from a single fence to ten parallel belts in vulnerable areas. Except in a few places this wire could not be seen from our positions on the lower slopes, but patrols had discovered much about it. Only when the enemy troops showed themselves on the skyline could any indication of the actual enemy posts be seen, and as air photographs did not show the sangars, trenches or holes constructed by the Italians, it was far from easy to ascertain the exact positions held by them. Nevertheless a very fair idea of the defences had been obtained, all of which merely confirmed that Keren was going to be an exceedingly hard nut to crack. The Italians had 33 battalions, including the Savoy Grenadier Division, about 120 guns and a large number of mortars and machine-guns. During the course of

the battle a further nine battalions were brought up, making the odds more than two to one. The 4th and 5th Indian Divisions had 19 battalions, and about 120 guns, and in addition there was the squadron of "I" tanks, which could not be used until the road had been repaired. The R A F had gained air superiority, but this did not mean that the troops would be immune from bombing and machine gunning, far from it, for if the attack looked like succeeding, it was certain that the enemy would bring up every available aircraft to try to stem the advance.

The photographs give some idea of the incredibly difficult country. The hills are 6,000 feet above sea level, but it is the rise from the valley below that gives the true figure. Mt Sanchil was an almost sheer rise of 2,412 feet, while Dologorodoc, which was the lowest of this formidable line of mountains, rises 1,475 feet, in places absolutely perpendicular. Mt Samman was 300 feet higher than Sanchil while Mts Amba and Beit Gabru were even more lofty. On the hills were some leafless, stunted trees, not thick enough to provide any cover, but occasionally affording a rickety handhold for climbers. And handholds were frequently required on these steep craggy slopes, out of which stuck great boulders and outcrops of smooth sheer rock. To the north of Keren, where Briggs Force was concentrated, the country is much the same, though the rise to the hills is not as high as it is to the south. The Italians were in a more fortunate position, as the Keren Vale is 1,500 feet higher than the Ascidera Valley. There had also been time for them to construct mule tracks to the top, as well as to lay a pipeline for water up to Sanchil. A road for vehicles led up to the fort on Dologorodoc, while another went to the foot of Amba.

The whole was a mighty fortress which the two Indian divisions had to attack. The 4th Division was to lead off by securing Sanchil. This formidable feature overlooks the fort and the gorge, and as soon as it had been secured, the 5th Division was to attack and capture the fort itself. In the meantime Briggs Force had as its primary task the containing of as large bodies of the enemy as possible in their sector, and also they were to try to find a passage through the hills and cut the road east of Keren.

#### *The 4th Division's Attack*

The 4th Division, in their attack on Sanchil, were faced with some difficult problems. The enemy had the majority of his troops in this area and had made the position very strong indeed. The peak of Sanchil itself could not be got at directly owing to the steepness of its west and south slopes, so it was necessary to secure first Brig's Peak, which had already twice been captured and lost. This feature consists of three pinnacles of rock about 200 feet high on top of the Sanchil Ridge, which on the Keren side drops even more steeply to the valley. Any counter attack had to come either from the Sanchil Peak or from "Bloody Hell", a hollow between Sanchil and Amba. It was therefore decided that the hills overlooking both Cameron Ridge and "Bloody Hell" would have to be captured if there was to be any hope of holding Brig's Peak. These hills were known as Saddle, Hog's Back, Flat Top and Mole Hill, and were the highest slopes of Cameron Ridge—some 800 foot climb. It was also considered that the three peaks of Mt Sammana would have to be captured in order to secure the Ascidera Valley from any counter attack on Pts 1702 1710, which would have been a

grave threat to our gun positions and lines of communications down in the valley. It was also vital to ensure that whatever might happen, Cameron Ridge was held, for if this were lost the 5th Division would be in grave danger.

At 7 a.m. on March 15, a terrific concentration of artillery fire came down on the enemy positions to the north of the road. Sanchul, Brig's Peak, Flat Top and Sammana disappeared behind a cloud of dust, which in the still, hot air slowly rolled down the mountains into the valley. The Camerons passed through our wire and climbed Brig's Peak, and in spite of intense opposition captured portions of the feature which twice before had been in our hands, only to be lost again. The battalion suffered very severely in this attack, and insufficient men were left to clear the enemy from these pinnacles. The position was heavily wired throughout its length, and in such hills it was impossible to climb through wire where it had not been cut. When eventually these terrible hills were taken the bodies of three Camerons were found right on the top of Brig's Peak. Viewed from the enemy's side, the positions seemed really impregnable.

Fighting continued throughout the day and the Royal Fusiliers went up from Cameron Ridge to assist the Highlanders and to exploit towards Sanchul. This battalion also suffered very heavily, one company near Brig's Peak being reduced to eight men. The top of Sanchul widens out from the narrow ridge at Brig's Peak into an area of huge rocks, very difficult to cross at any time, and nigh impossible in full equipment. A rifle was of little use in the gurgles and holes in this fearful place, and the attack developed into a series of bombing attacks against machine guns. Though part of the mountain top was gained the main positions could

not be taken, and during the whole battle the enemy held the peak until the town was captured. The Italian Grenadier Division fought very stoutly, expecting the assault to come there, particular trouble had been taken with the defences, which were manned with their best troops.

To the west of Brig's Peak, the Rajputana Rifles advanced on and captured Hog's Back, once more against very strong opposition. The battalion lost over 50 per cent of its strength, but succeeded in consolidating the captured ground and repulsing enemy counter attacks with heavy loss.

Further to the left the Mahrattas carried Flat Top in a most gallant manner and also succeeded in driving off enemy attacks, but as with all the other battalions, the casualties had been so heavy that the position was held very thinly. The artillery preparation had not done nearly as much damage as had been expected, for the enemy was tucked away in holes in the rocks, and only a direct hit could damage him. But it gave some idea of the fury of these attacks by British and Indian battalions against strong machine gun fire, showers of grenades and heavy fire from artillery and mortars, when it was found that the Italian dead far outnumbered ours and many had bayonet wounds.

Further to the west the Sikhs were attacking the three peaks of Mt Sammana. The western peak was captured in the first rush, but the other two, known as Middle and Right Bumps, could not be taken. Three times the Sikhs attacked Middle Bump, and though they got within 40 yards of the top on each occasion, they could not get through the showers of grenades that were flung down on to them as they swarmed up the great boulders and through the wire. Second Lieutenant

Mohd Siddiq led the company which captured the western peak in the face of intense fire and as soon as it was secured, organised support for the other attacking companies. When the commander of the company assaulting Middle Bump was wounded, Mohd Siddiq took over command and led a night attack. Although twice wounded he got right up to the enemy sangars.

The enemy had plenty of troops in the Amba area and as a result of the attack brought up a fresh brigade, recently arrived at Keren, to try to recover the lost ground. All through the night following March 15, counter attacks were put in on the tired troops. The Camerons and Fusiliers just managed to cling on to their positions, though next morning the Camerons had only 30 men left with which to hold the crest. It should be remembered that one company from each battalion was occupied in carrying water, ammunition and food to the fighting troops—wickedly tiring work and always under fire.

The Mahiattas held Flat Top against particularly strong counter attacks, and though the enemy succeeded in obtaining a footing on the hill, they were driven out again. Captain A J Oldham, the Adjutant of the Battalion, rapidly appreciated the dangerous situation, and collecting odd men, he led them in a determined bayonet charge which cleared the hill once more and killed over a hundred of the enemy.

The Rajputana Rifles also had a hard night repulsing three counter attacks, one of which got right into the position, but was turned out at the point of the bayonet. At daylight it was seen that all the captured positions were still held, although the situation on Brig's Peak was critical.

*The 5th Division Captures Dologorodoc*

The 5th Indian Division was now taking a hand. At 10.30 a.m. on March 15, the H.L.I. started to attack Pinnacle and Pimple, two under features of Dologorodoc. Owing to the heavy fire from the fort and the slopes of Sauchil inside the gorge, they were unable to get across the road and the attack petered out. It was a very hot day and amid the clouds of dust down in the valley the troops were greatly tried by thirst.

It was then decided to try to secure the fort during the night when there would be a good moon. Shortly after dark under cover of a heavy artillery barrage, the Mahratta Light Infantry crossed the road and started to climb the Pinnacle. The attack met strong opposition, but the Mahrattas were not to be denied and had a footing on top by 8 p.m., and also on the Col leading to Pimple. Subedar Shrinang Lawand was largely responsible for the success of this daring attack. He appeared to be everywhere, cheering his men on and bearing a charmed life. On top of the feature there was still much mopping up to be done, and the cheers of the Mahrattas could be heard down in the valley as they winkled the enemy out of the holes in the rock with bayonet and grenade. A company of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment then passed through the Mahrattas and captured Pimple. By midnight both these important features were in our hands.

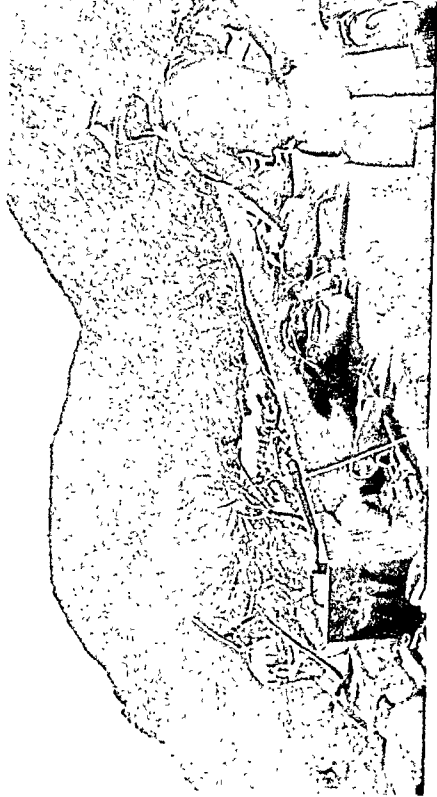
The attack on the actual fort then began. The West Yorkshire Regiment went through the troops on Pinnacle and Pimple and climbed upwards towards the fort along a knife edged ridge. Its name, Razor Ridge, gives some idea of the shape of this feature. The enemy were surprised by the attack.



from this direction, for they least expected it along this tiny ridge. The West Yorks had some very hard fighting indeed, but they reached the top and by 6.30 a.m. the fort on the top of Mt. Dologorodoc was completely secured. This success was aided in a curious way. About 2 a.m. the Italians launched a determined counter attack on the Mahrattas. This battalion, and the company of the "Piffers", were still rather disorganised and dispersed after mopping up; but in the dark, section and platoon commanders collected their men to stem this new menace. After some hours of intense hand to hand fighting, the enemy were driven back in disorder. The remnants climbed the hill again, only to find the West Yorks in possession. All these Italians were either killed or captured. The depletion of the garrison by this counter attack had helped the Yorkshiremen considerably. It was found that the fort itself had been very much damaged by the artillery bombardment during the February attacks, when more than *3,000 shells were dropped on it*. True, the Italians had constructed many new defences but there was not so much wire as had been found on the Sanchil front. The enemy considered the place impregnable and had saved most of his wire for the Sanchil and Acqua fronts.

The capture of Dologorodoc made all the difference. There was good observation on to the Keren plain and artillery could now make enemy movement most difficult by day. But it was an exceedingly hot spot. On the left Sanchil towered a thousand-foot higher. Zeban in front and Falestoh on the right, though not as high as Sanchil or overlooking to such an extent, had nevertheless a very good view of everything that went on. The Italians considered Dologorodoc the key of the position, and they wanted it back, as they proceeded





"It was a hot spot," banded on the right and Cameron Itulge in the centre as seen from Dologoroloe.

to show. During March 16, a series of determined counter attacks were launched, all of which were repulsed with very heavy losses due to artillery and small arms' fire and also due to our air bombing. It was in repulsing attacks of this type that the superiority in training with the rifle and machine-gun came in most valuable. The Italians were poor marksmen while the Colonial troops were rank bad. The Indians and British were able to pick off the advancing enemy as soon as they came in view, and assisted by the devastating fire of the artillery, frequently broke up attacks long before they came within reach.

On March 15, the 16th Punjab Regiment, the Royal Sussex and the Free French Battalions started to demonstrate against the Keren northern defences on the road from Cub Cub. This force was not sufficiently strong to hope to break through the very strong natural positions in that area. Its object was to keep as large as possible a body of the enemy busy, and so prevent battalions and guns being moved from the northern front to reinforce the regiments facing the main attacks up the gorge. This was most successfully accomplished, the four battalions containing a force of seven or eight Italian battalions and a large number of guns. Although the attempt to capture Mt. Engiahah was only partially successful, and the Foreign Legion failed to break through to the road, considerable losses were inflicted on the enemy and he dared not move troops across to meet the attacks of the 4th and 5th Divisions.

On March 16, the R.A.F. had been very active bombing enemy positions, guns and counter attacks, but they were not having things all their own way. For the previous three weeks not a single enemy aeroplane had been seen, but on this day

both bombers and fighters made their appearance. One very exciting event took place. Two enemy fighters attacked an R A F Wellesley which they shot down in flames. Just too late a Gladiator arrived and dived down on to the two Fiats, one of which made for home. The other received a burst of fire, which caused it to drop towards the valley. When near the ground, it recovered and made off just over the troops. But the Gladiator had followed it down and gave the coup de grâce only 100 feet up. The troops, occupying grandstand seats on the hills above, looked right down on the fight, and their cheers could be heard above the noise of battle.

### *Failure to Make Further Progress*

During the night March 16/17 attacks were put in on both sides of the road. To the east, the 5th Division tried to seize Zeban and Falestoh, while on the other front a further attempt was made to capture Sanchul. Both attacks failed.

The Worcesters on the right and the 2nd Punjab Regiment on the left moved through the troops on Dologorodoc and advanced on Falestoh and Zeban. Considerable fighting took place in the dark, but when dawn came both battalions were still some distance from their objectives and were pinned to the ground by heavy mortar and machine-gun fire. An Italian attack on the left rear of the Punjabis was repulsed with the help of a company of the 13th Frontier Force Rifles, but the position was precarious. Supply difficulties added to their troubles, and though the Air Force dropped ammunition on the Worcesters, water and food were still a major problem. Everything had to be carried up to the fort by hand, and thenceforward across bullet-swept ground. The wounded had to

be evacuated in the same way. The porter companies and stretcher bearers stuck to their unenviable task magnificently, but as there was little hope of getting further forward, after dark on the 17th the two battalions were withdrawn. Various positions were occupied to the north of the fort covering 11 field and two pack guns, which the enemy had been forced to abandon.

On the other side of the road also matters had not gone well. The remnants of the Camerons and Fusiliers were still clinging on to their insecure foothold in the saddle between Sanchil and Brig's Peak, and it was hoped that with this new attack by three fresh battalions the great feature might be captured. But it was not to be, in spite of great bravery by the attacking troops. The Royal Garhwal Rifles passed through the Fusiliers and advanced down the feature towards Sanchil Peak. They were met with an intense grenade defence as well as much machine gun and mortar fire. Everyone of the British officers was knocked out and the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel S. E. Tayler, D.S.O., killed, but the Subedar Major took over command and the fight continued. That night and all next day this terrific fight went on, swaying backwards and forwards, but gradually the Garhwals were pushed back to the line held by the Fusiliers. On the left the Baluchis could not secure the Brig's Peak feature, although getting within 200 yards. The HLI supported the Camerons and Fusiliers on the Col.

It was decided to withdraw all troops from Sanchil Brig's Peak during the night, for the third time our troops had won a footing on these almost inaccessible heights, only to lose it again. The Rajputana Rifles remained on Hog's Back.

and the Mahrattas on Flat Top, while the Camerons and Fusiliers returned once again to Cameron Ridge. The other three battalions returned to the 5th Division, and the end of a phase in the battle had been reached. Odd men of the Camerons and Garhwalis, who had not received the order to withdraw, continued to come in during succeeding days, having in the meanwhile carried on individually in attempts to reach their objectives. We had suffered heavily, particularly the 4th Division, but the enemy had lost even more. We had captured and held Dologorodoc, and in his efforts to get it back the enemy wore himself out in the next week, thereby making our task easier.

For three days counter attacks were continually made by the Italians on both fronts. They were put in with the greatest determination and usually in very considerable force. It speaks very highly for our troops, tired out, short of sleep and water, continually under fire and very thin on the ground, that not one of these efforts had even a small measure of success. It is not possible to tell the stories of all these actions in detail, but two will indicate the general run of events.

On the night after the attack on Zeban had failed, a very strong counter attack was put in by an Italian battalion just after dark. The whole brunt fell on a company of the 13th Frontier Force Rifles which suffered 35 casualties. Captain Anant Singh Pathania, although wounded in the face and both legs, collected his company headquarters and any others he could find, and drove back the enemy at the point of the bayonet. Although the Italians were inside our line, all men stood firm and eventually the enemy retreated in

disorder leaving many killed and wounded on the ground.

Shortly before midnight on March 23, the 12th Frontier Force Regiment was attacked by a fresh battalion from the front and by four medium tanks, which came up the track on to the rear of the position held by the regiment below Dologorodoc. In the darkness there was considerable confusion, but not a man thought of getting away. The tanks were first dealt with, being forced to retire after pouring in intense fire at point blank range. Then the infantry in front were driven back. It was this ability of our troops to continue fighting with their deadly bayonets, when their line was overrun, that time and again pushed back the Italians when all seemed lost.

All through this heavy fighting the medical services performed wonders. They had no rest throughout the battle, and were desperately overworked dealing with a large number of wounded. The stretcher bearers were magnificent, bringing the wounded back down the steep slopes under fire. It took more than two hours to get a stretcher case down from Sammana to the railway, and having arrived there the tired bearers had to start the climb to the top once more. Hot tea was always ready in huge quantities. The ambulance drivers, too, had tremendously long hours and showed great skill in saving their patients pain along the bumpy roads. The casualty lists were a testimonial to the medical services, for although the number of wounded was large, those who "Died of Wounds" were few.

No account of this battle can be complete without mention of the 51st Commando. Composed of Palestinians, both Arabs and Jews, and



commanded by British officers, this small body carried out an extremely important rôle. It was sent to the north of Beit Gabru to make a feint attack on the enemy from that direction. For more than a fortnight it was engaged amongst the hills and it drew off no less than three enemy battalions and about eight guns. Later this gang of "toughs" covered themselves with glory at Amba Alagi.

### *Patrols and Preparations*

The initiative was not allowed to pass to the enemy. Each night patrols went out destroying enemy posts and gaining valuable information. All regiments took part, but two instances suffice to give an idea of what was happening.

On the Sammana front a patrol of the 1st Punjab Regiment from Pt 1710 went through between the enemy positions on the hills behind Sammana right round almost to Mt Amba, where supply parties were shot up. On the way back an enemy post was engaged from the rear, and the patrol returned after causing no little alarm among enemy positions.

Patrols frequently visited Sanchil. One from the Royal Fusiliers spent 24 hours on the mountain, repelling attacks, but although a company was sent up to try to exploit their success, it was found that the enemy was still too strong. This enemy garrison on Sanchil did very well indeed. Constantly shelled, strongly attacked on two occasions, they held their position until the end. When the peak was afterwards occupied, it was realised how very strong it was. Among the huge boulders, frequently 15 to 20 feet high, sangars had been built and thickly wired, yet the bodies of Fusiliers and Garhwalis were found

right up on the peak itself, showing how these men had pressed on when all their comrades had been knocked out. It was the astounding determination of individual men like these which beat the Italians in this, the toughest battle of the war.

The Sappers and Miners had been working at high pressure all this time. Several attempts had been made to clear the road block at night, but the enemy would not allow this, keeping that part of the road under artillery, mortar and machine gun fire practically continuously. In addition, the tunnel below Cameron Ridge was cleared, it had been blocked by derailed trucks full of stone. The last part of this task was done in the open under fire.

### *The Dongolaas Gorge*

The night of March 24 was much quieter, the enemy putting in no counter attacks and our patrols having an easier time. It appeared that the enemy's morale was none too good after the failure of his efforts to regain the fort and the hills above Cameron Ridge. Preparations were made for the next stage in the attack.

Once the tanks could be got into Keren it was realised that the battle would be won. But until the road was repaired this was impossible. The Sappers and Miners, escorted by infantry and covered by the artillery, had made valiant but unavailing efforts to do this work. The enemy fire was so intense from Sanchil, the Railway Bumps and all the other features at the top of the gorge that the work had had to be given up. An attack was therefore planned to clear the enemy from these smaller hills. The risk entailed, since the Italians would hold the great mountains overlooking the gorge, was accepted, the enemy was

known to be tired and somewhat shaken after the failure of his counter attacks. As the Sappers said that they could remake the road in 48 hours, it was believed that the infantry would be able to hold on for that time. It was a vital moment

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It is a pitch dark night. There is no moon to give even a vestige of light down in the grim gorge. The wind, which for the last few days has been swirling the dust round the peaks, has died down. Conditions for achieving surprise are not good. Up on the heights of Sanchul can be heard the sounds of battle, where the Fusiliers and Rajputana Rifles are staging a fake attack to distract the enemy. At three o'clock in the morning, the HLI debouch from Cameron Tunnel, and silently pick their way along the battered railway line. On the other side of the gorge the West Yorks slip down from the fort and with no artillery support secure a hill immediately above the road. The attack has started.

At half past four the artillery opens. Over 100 guns pour their shells on to the intricate mass of small hills. The bursts can be seen in a long line across the top of the gorge gradually becoming dimmer as great clouds of dust rise and hang in the still air, blotting out the first faint streaks of the dawn. The HLI push along the steep slopes of Sanchul cutting their way through wire, mopping up the enemy posts, until they are established on the north side of the great mountain.

The Baluchis follow. They slip up on to the hills below the HLI, the Railway Bumps, a series of craggy hills. Fighting is hard. But the enemy, blasted by the artillery, utterly surprised, cannot stand up to this determined attack. Before



The Keren Vale from Dologorodoc.



A Dressing Stat on in a Culvert

7 a.m., with the sun just beginning to throw its rays on the dusty, smoky scene in the valley, the Baluchis have captured the hills and prisoners begin to trickle back along the railway.

While this is happening, the Mahrattas are covering themselves with undying glory on the other side of the gorge. Their task is to pass through the West Yorks and capture two hills beside the road. They are strongly held by good enemy troops. The Mahrattas meet intense opposition. The sound of small arms fire, bursting bombs and the explosion of shells combine into one roar which echoes back and forth among the forbidding peaks. Men are falling fast but the Mahrattas still push on. In one platoon only three men are left, but they rush an enemy sangar with the bayonet. The wounded pick themselves up and make their painful way, not back, but forward to help their comrades. As the cheers of the Baluchis from across the gorge come faintly through the din of battle, the Mahrattas secure the second hill.

Though the hills on either side are now in our hands, there still remains the central ridge. The 2nd Punjab Regiment makes its way up the narrow sandy bed of the torrent under cover of an intense artillery bombardment, deploys between the Baluchis and West Yorks and with a steady rush goes up the Railway Ridge. It is stoutly defended, but the enemy have lost heavily in the shelling, and soon the hill with 200 prisoners is captured.

The 5th Division is through the gorge.

At once the Sappers and Miners set to work on the road block. The enemy shells still come over, but no longer are they accurate for all telephonic communication between the guns and their

observation posts has been cut. Working like beavers, the engineers clear the huge rocks, blowing up the great falls from the hills above. But most of the work has to be done with pick and shovel and even with hands. All that day they carry on toiling at intense speed, taking no heed of the terrific battle raging all round them. Night does not stop them, and by midday on the 26th the road has been remade.

But the forward battalions are not having an easy time. All communication with the H L I and the Baluchis is through the tunnel, the mouth of which is covered by two machine guns. These are well dug in, stoutly manned, and neither mortar nor artillery fire can silence them. The Jammu and Kashmir Mountain Battery is turned on to deal with them. Late in the afternoon, a direct hit finally silences the brave enemy and at last supplies can be taken forward without running the gauntlet of these two guns.

Shortly after the capture of Railway Ridge, the enemy launch a strong counter attack on the Punjabis. Supported by tanks and accurate artillery fire, the Italians come along over the broken ground. The infantry are first halted and then driven back by the devastating fire of our artillery and infantry. But the tanks come on. Right up to the position they come, but the terrific hail of fire from the Punjabis is too much for the crews. The tanks retire damaged and are no more seen in action. During the day two more attacks are repulsed and at nightfall the 2nd Punjabis still hold their ground.

During the afternoon the Fusiliers once more assault Sanchul with one and a half companies. They reach to within 100 yards of the peak, but the

fort on top is still untakable. This attack, however, distracts the enemy's attention from the road where the Sappers and Miners are working. The Mahrattas, too, are having a very tough time. No less than three strong counter attacks are put in, but the remnants of this great battalion beat them off and night falls with the position held everywhere.

The next day the enemy are not so active. They are tired out and they realise that there is not much more that they can do. Our troops are through the gorge and once the road is repaired Keren must fall.

### *Keren At Last*

At half past four on the morning of March 27, an artillery barrage comes down on Zeban and Falestoh and the Worcesters and Garhwahs advance to the final assault. But the enemy has gone. The two great peaks are secured without opposition and the 12th Frontier Force Regiment pass through and seize Mt Cannabai, from where they can harass the Italians retreating in disorder down the road. By half past seven, Keren is at last in our hands.

On top of Sanchul a white flag appears and the gallant garrison surrenders to the Fusiliers. These Bersaglieri have fought magnificently, and they, the Alpini and Savoy Grenadiers have lived up to their reputation. The Baluchis and H L I have placed themselves across the Keren Valley to intercept fugitives, and prisoners are being collected in large numbers.

It has been a glorious victory. Outnumbered by more than two to one, over some of the most difficult country imaginable, against positions skilfully prepared, well wired and held in determined



fashion, this successful assault is an outstanding feat of arms.

The results are of great importance. Massawa soon falls, thereby opening the Red Sea for American war material in American ships to reach Egypt. The Italian East African Empire collapses and so troops are released to meet the German threat in Cyrenaica and Syria. In the future, it is possible that history may mark this as one of the decisive battles of the world. It is a battle honour which all units, British and Indian alike, will treasure with particular pride in centuries to come.



The Road Block in the Dongo as Gorge was repa red.



\* The booty was enormous, quite impossible even to guess

# EIGHT

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*To Asmara and Massawa*

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A STRAIGHT line drawn between Keren and Asmara measures 40 miles, but by the road which winds through the mountains the distance is over 60 miles. The capital is nearly 3,000 feet higher than Keren, and though the road dips occasionally the general rise is continuous and often steep. It was known that the enemy had prepared a position at Ad Teclesan, about 35 miles from Keren, where the road twists through the last hills before the plain is entered, and so it was of vital importance to follow up the retreating Italians at once before their forces could be re-organised for a last stand in the hills. The operation therefore became a race against time to get a mobile force through the gorge to go in pursuit.

The newly made road across the site of the block was difficult and many vehicles stuck, but as soon as enough had passed over, Fletcher Force\* did not wait for the remainder but pushed on as

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hard as possible through Keren and along the road towards Ad Teclesan. On the way a large proportion of the enemy's infantry retreating in disorder was overtaken. They were ordered to lay down their arms, which they did, and were instructed to return to Keren, which they also did. Our troops following up later encountered these groups of disarmed soldiers streaming back along the road, looking like crowds leaving a football match, their side vanquished. Subsequent tally proved that but few of the Savoy Grenadiers or the Blackshirts had escaped, and though the Colonial prisoners exceeded 3,000, many others had wandered off through the hills to their homes.

Fletcher Force ran into opposition about 24 miles beyond Keren, where progress was checked by a concrete and steel rail obstacle with a landslide demolition further on. The country here is most intricate, the hills are much smaller than on the edge of the plateau but are tumbled together with no apparent plan. The road twists and turns through them, 100 yards of straight being rare. Next morning the 2nd Punjab Regiment and the 13th Frontier Force Rifles moved up to assist Fletcher Force and fighting began once again.

Meanwhile at Keren there was much to be done. There were still many parties of enemy in the hills to be collected and brought to the prisoners' camps. To the 4th Division was given the work of mopping up, searching for wounded, burying the dead and collecting booty. This last item was enormous, quite impossible even to guess, two months later dumps were still being located among the mountains. Nearly 100 guns had been abandoned, great quantities of ammunition, food, medical stores and vehicles were found. It was now realised how terribly the Italians had

suffered and how effective our artillery fire had been. The hills were littered with dead, the houses in the town were full of wounded. Though our casualties in the battle had been more than 3,000, the enemy must have lost more than double that number in killed and wounded.

From now onwards the 5th Indian Division carried on the campaign alone, except for help from Briggs Force in the capture of Massawa. The 4th Indian Division, after two and a half months of fighting in this area, went off to gain further laurels in Syria and the Western Desert. It was sad for these two Divisions of the Indian army thus to be parted after fighting side by side through this arduous campaign, but probably they will be together again before the war is ended.

#### *Ad Peclesan*

The Italians had destroyed the road in many places in order to delay the advance and in consequence these operations followed almost a stereotyped form. The mobile troops ran up against the demolition and carried out reconnaissances to discover the extent of the enemy position, the infantry then arrived and assisted by the artillery forced the enemy from the hills on either side, the Sappers and Miners cleared the road block, and the tanks and guns went through.

There was some hard fighting along the road in which the West Yorkshire Regiment, the 2nd Punjabis, the 12th Frontier Force Regiment and the 13th Frontier Force Rifles particularly distinguished themselves, while some of the Baluchis carried out a brilliant march which placed them in rear of the enemy's position. The Italians were however very disorganised and their morale shattered. In face of these determined attacks they gave way easily.

A little force consisting of some of the C I H and the H L I in trucks and lorries went along the railway from Keren towards Asmara. This entailed much difficult driving and a lot of hard work. Many culverts and bridges had been broken and had to be filled up with rocks before the party could proceed. After numerous small fights a strong position was encountered. As with the defences at Ad Teclesin these had not been hurriedly prepared, but constructed with fore thought and care. The H L I put in an attack on the main hill, which they christened H L I Hill, and after some fighting took part of it. That was enough for the enemy, in this case the indifferent 150th Blackshirt Battalion which, after its virtual annihilation by the Camerons at Agordat, had been made up again with fresh recruits. On the same evening that the position at Ad Teclesin was taken the Italians evacuated their hold on the railway.

The real credit for the swift rush forward to Asmara must be given to the administrative staff and services. Supplies had to be brought from railhead at Kassala nearly 200 miles away, along roads which had been indifferently repaired and which rapidly broke up under the heavy traffic. The R I A S C and Cape Companies from South Africa performed marvels, driving long hours often without lights at night and yet keeping their vehicles going. The I A O C also deserve special mention for their wonderful repair work, for any serious break down in this line would have stopped the advance and prevented the capture of Entrea until after the rains.

When finally the 5th Division broke through on to the plain emissaries came out with



The Sappers and Miners cleared the road blocks





white flags Asmara was declared an open town and was occupied on April 1 Thus, after two and a half months of intense fighting, the capital of Eritrea surrendered after their long and resolute stand at Keren the Italians had cracked

The task of looking after Asmara was no light one The town was full of troops, both Italian and African, who had to be collected, many of the civilians were armed, while there was a large number of women and children to be protected The Italian civil authorities co operated in maintaining order, but it was an unpleasant job for the soldiers Brigadier T W Rees, CIE, DSO, MC, had the unique experience of a telephone conversation with the Italian Chief of Staff at Massawa, when he demanded that the port facilities should in no way be damaged, otherwise responsibility could not be assumed for the feeding and possible evacuation of the civilians in Asmara The matter was referred to the Duke of Aosta, and the reply was received that the commander of Massawa was to adhere to his previous orders It therefore was necessary to capture the port

### *Massawa*

In 60 miles the road from Asmara to Massawa drops 7,000 feet The climate changes from pleasant mild warmth to intense damp heat, the vegetation from trees and green grass to bare sand and rock The shock to the system is considerable Yet the capture of the port was of great importance for it would enable the long lines of communication from the Sudan to be shortened by 200 miles, and so assist the advance into Abyssinia to continue

Three days after they had marched into Asmara on the heels of the Central India Horse, a

force consisting of the Highland Light Infantry, 10th Baluch Regiment and 18th Royal Garhwal Rifles, accompanied by tanks and guns, set off down the steep road to the coast. Although the road had been blocked in many places, the force made rapid progress; in the afternoon contact was made with the Foreign Legion, who with all the remainder of Briggs Force had slipped down to the coast from Keren and come along the foot of the escarpment. In the soft sand and among the dry nala beds they had had a hard march, but had successfully pushed back the Italian outposts and found out much about the enemy's defences. When passing this information to General Heath their chagrin can be imagined when he told them that he knew it all already. In Asmara a map showing the enemy defences, positions of guns, forts, everything, had been found, which very materially helped in the capture of the port.

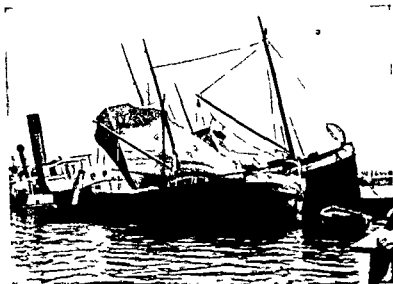
Within 24 hours of leaving the capital the force was outside Massawa, having pushed back all the enemy's outposts to the west of the town. A white flag was seen displayed in the Italian lines and so a party also under a white flag was sent to Massawa. The Italian Admiral wished to know what were our terms. When told (and they were uncompromising) he replied that he must ask Il Duce. Mussolini answered that the town was to be defended to the last man, and so the attack started. It was going to be no picnic, for the Italians were known to have a large number of guns and about 10,000 troops, composed of Italians and Africans, soldiers, sailors and marines.

Shortly after dark on April 7 the advance began. The Garhwalis occupied several small hills overlooking the town against weak opposition.





Asmara was declared an 'open town'



"A horrid mess had been made of the quays."

Then the H.L.I. went through to secure Signal Hill, a key point. The enemy's resistance increased as our troops approached Massawa, but when shortly after dawn the "I" tanks went through, the hostile fire rapidly slackened. The enemy artillery fire continued intense but inaccurate, and when the foothills between Signal Hill and the town were taken, the battle was virtually over.

From the north came the sound of heavy firing where Briggs Force was encountering strong opposition. There was much wire and many mines and it appeared that the Italians had made special preparations for an attack from this direction. However, the tanks moved along the outskirts of the town and as soon as they made their presence felt the resistance collapsed. It then became a race for who should be first into the town, a race that was won by the 16th Punjab Regiment by the narrowest of margins.

The sound of loud explosions was heard from the harbour. The enemy were busy blowing up ammunition dumps and scuttling ships. A horrid mess was made of the quays, but many of the 30 vessels could be salvaged. Once again the booty was enormous, while over 400 officers, including admirals and generals, were captured. Massawa fell seven days after the occupation of the capital and only 12 days after the fall of Keren.

Many units then returned to Asmara, and there bade farewell to General Heath, who was proceeding to take up another appointment on promotion. Barring a few islands off Massawa and the isolated port of Assab, the capture of Eritrea was complete, though there still remained large tracts of Abyssinia to be conquered.

# NINE

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## *The Capture of Amba Alagi*

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AFTER the fall of Asmara the 5th Indian Division was split up. Part went to Massawa, part remained in Asmara sorting out the very difficult problems that arose in taking over this large town, and a small force pursued the Italians down the road towards Addis Ababa. This pursuit party consisted of the Central India Horse and some Motor Machine Gun Companies of the Sudan Defence Force, a ridiculously small force for it was known that there were many enemy troops along the road. However, it was felt that there must be much disorganisation and that the risk was justified.

### *The Pursuit to the South*

The first excitement was on arrival at Adi Ugri, though before that a number of stragglers had been collected. At that town was the prisoners of war camp and the Central India Horse had the joyous job of releasing all the prisoners, British and Indian. Actually they only just arrived in time for otherwise they might have found the birds flown. A tunnel had been constructed under the floor of the building and the

prisoners were hoping to make their exit in a few nights' time

It is not possible to tell in detail all the doings of this energetic party. They had lots of fun. They captured some 2 000 prisoners, who were frequently only too glad to surrender owing to the activities of the Abyssinian patriots. They secured several large dumps of stores and on one occasion captured a complete battalion in lorries. The lorries were turned round and the battalion moved north under escort instead of south as free men. One example is sufficient to show the dash and bluff with which these troops acted.

Information was received that there was an aerodrome some 60 miles away with large stores of petrol, spare parts and vehicles and that it was about to be abandoned. It was decided to try to capture the garrison before they could damage anything, and so the only available troops, a squadron of the Central India Horse, were despatched just before dark. All through the night they made their way along the twisty road, but when the squadron arrived at the aerodrome in the first light of dawn only 30 men remained. Owing to break downs and accidents in the dark many vehicles had been left on the way. However, the squadron commander was not daunted by the disparity in numbers, which was later found to be twenty to one and driving out into the open found the enemy already embussed ready to move off. To the demand of surrender the Italian commander was at first inclined to agree, but although he was assured that this was only the advanced guard of a large force he eventually decided to fight it out. "All right", he was told. "But before you make up your mind finally, just listen. You'll hear the tanks coming." The Italian listened, and, sure



enough, away down the road could be heard the clatter and roar of tracked vehicles. With a sigh, which may have been of relief, he surrendered. A quarter of an hour later two armoured carriers, which had made repairs *en route*, drove into the aerodrome, but by then the garrison had been disarmed!

After passing Makale much more resistance was encountered. Several times road blocks were met and on two occasions the leading squadron was ambushed. The initiative shown by the junior commanders was great on these occasions, sections or troops at once working round the flanks to kill or capture the enemy. At last the regiment bumped up against the enemy main position at the Toselli Pass, and the work of reconnaissance began. Shortly afterwards Skinner's Horse arrived, having come across country from Barentu and Arressa, and the Central India Horse returned to Asmara, having pursued the enemy for 230 miles with no artillery or infantry support.

### *The Road to Gondar*

The Italians had a strong garrison at Gondar near Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, and some troops had retired from Asmara along this 500 mile road. Reconnaissances discovered that the road passed over the Wolcheft Pass, 10,000 feet high, and that the enemy had utterly destroyed it. Its construction had been an amazing feat of engineering. It is cut out of a sheer cliff 2,000 feet high, and while making it men had to be suspended on ropes from the top. A frontal attack was impossible and as any movement to the flank was extremely difficult in this precipitous craggy country, the idea of an advance on Gondar from the north had to be abandoned.



collecting prisoners arms and ammunition



The main obstacle is the Toselli Pass, where the road climbs 2 000 feet n z g zag bends

*Amba Alagi*

After the idea of capturing Gondar had had to be given up, the plan was to open the road from Asmara to Addis Ababa, and so join up with General Cunningham's force of South and West African troops. This road is a magnificent engineering feat, climbing huge hills, crossing deep gorges and twisting its way over the wet mountainous land. The biggest obstacle is the Toselli Pass, 10,000 feet high, where the road climbs 2,000 odd feet in zig zag bends to drop again on the far side, while towering above it is the mass of Mt. Amba Alagi, 2,000 feet higher. All around the country is craggy, broken and steep, running up to knife-edged ridges which make the North West Frontier appear child's play. By the time our troops arrived the weather had broken with frequent heavy cold thunderstorms and thick clinging mists, very similar to monsoon conditions in the mountains of India.

A Gurkha Battalion still holds the height record for fighting, when during the advance to Lhasa in Tibet it was in action at 18,000 feet, but the battle of Amba Alagi must surely hold the record for height between forces armed with modern weapons.

The Italian position on Amba Alagi had been prepared with some care. Galleries driven into the living rock provided cover for troops, guns and stores, a direct hit was necessary to knock out a gun and yet 14 of the 35 guns were afterwards found to have been smashed by direct hits, wonderful shooting by the British gunners. The Italians had ample supplies of water, food and ammunition and once again they considered ~~th~~<sup>th</sup> they were holding an impregnable position. For ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> last time they were to be disillusioned.

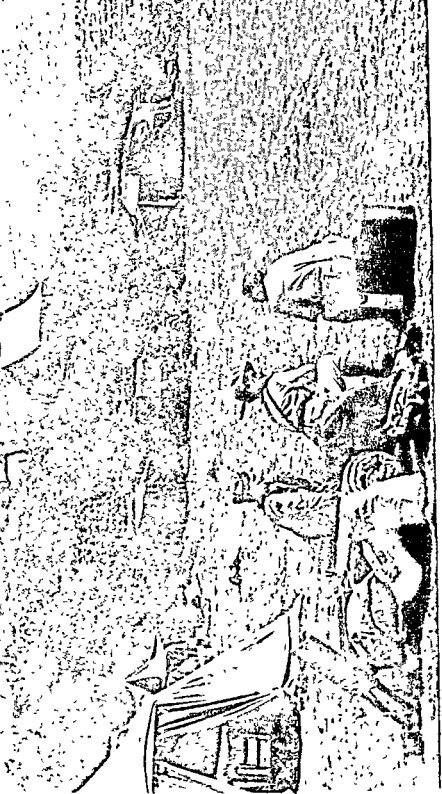
Supply difficulties for the 5th Division were great. The road was good from Asmara, once the demolitions had been repaired, but the 244 miles placed a tremendous strain on the R.I.A.S.C. Units had to be left for internal security in Asmara and Massawa, and also for guarding the lines of communications. These factors limited the number of troops available for the assault on the Italian position, and once again our forces were at a numerical disadvantage though not so large as on previous occasions.

No maps of the area were available, except one on a small scale which annoyingly finished just short of the Toselli Pass, but Skinner's Horse, who had relieved the Central India Horse, were in touch with the enemy and had carried out many most valuable reconnaissances. The country was really terrific. The main road approached directly from the north; while some eight miles from the pass a rough track, destroyed in many places, led to the Falaga Pass some five miles east of Amba Alagi, where it abruptly terminated at an impassable mountain wall. The 1st South African Brigade captured Dessie on April 28, thus *marooning the Italians at the pass*, but there was still 200 miles to traverse before the forces from the south could arrive to help the 5th Division.

A clever plan to bluff the enemy as to the direction of the attack was concocted by General Mayne. Fletcher Force, consisting of Skinner's Horse, a company of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment, artillery, Sudanese and the 51st Middle East Commando, moved along the road towards the Falaga Pass, clearing blocks and making it appear that the assault would develop from the east. During the night of May 3-4 this force advanced to within a few hundred yards of the pass; the



swarmed the hill and went in with the bayonet.



"Emissaries were sent to ask for an armistice."

Commando scaled with ropes an almost unclimbable hill, and was later joined by the company of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment. The whole force encountered strong opposition, repulsed several counter attacks and took a number of prisoners.

Meanwhile the Garhwahs, on the evening of May 3, advanced on the line of the main road to Medani Alem some three and a half miles from the pass, and kept up a most realistic and bold demonstration throughout the night. They actually penetrated the enemy's main position at one point and by a controlled display of lights convincingly demonstrated the first steps of a brigade attack. These two feints had the desired effect, drawing off considerable numbers of the enemy to Falaga and fixing attention on the main road.

At 4.15 a.m. on May 4 the real attack began. This was carried out by the same troops who had fought their way from Aicota to Barentu, and was made over the hills from the north west. Each hill, ridge and spur had been given a name, Pyramid, Fin, Whale Back, Elephant were the objectives for the brigade and all four had been captured in three hours. Then this rapid advance was checked for it was found that the only way in which further progress could be made was along a knife edged ridge, devoid of cover and commanded from the high hills at the far end. This part of the country is very similar to the hills round Simla, deep valleys between the ridges at the bottom of which ran torrents too far beneath to be either seen or heard.

Next morning before dawn this ridge was crossed and the hill captured after a sharp engagement. Further advance was along another narrow ridge, about 150 yards wide, flanked by precipices, wired



side only to start up once more. By 4 a.m. they had reached a position south-west of Amba Alagi, and at once the attack went in silently. While the artillery and the remainder of the force made a demonstration as if they were the attackers from the north-west, the Frontier Force Rifles swarmed the last hill and went in with the bayonet. Surprise was complete. All the hill was taken with the exception of a small part which was held by the Italians as the result of a disgraceful episode. A white flag in token of surrender was hoisted; as a company went up to take over they were greeted with a shower of grenades which inflicted severe casualties.

Under cover of a thick fog the Italians counter attacked later in the day and recaptured one of the hills, but the remainder was securely held. As Fletcher Force completed the capture of the Falaga Pass on the 9th, the situation was very satisfactory. With our troops to the south, north-west, north and east, the Italians were nearly surrounded, and with the heartening news that the South Africans were rapidly approaching, the enemy position appeared desperate. But the main mountain was still held, and as there was no shortage of water or supplies on Amba Alagi it seemed that much hard fighting would be necessary before the stronghold was captured.

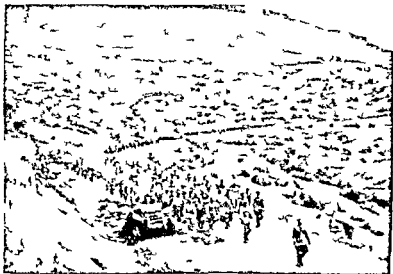
On May 12 the South Africans arrived from the south, and methodically attacked the feature known as Triangle immediately to the east of Amba Alagi. Fletcher Force, which had been deprived of Skinner's Horse and given the Garhwalis and the remainder of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment, closed in over terribly difficult country from the east. During the night May 14-15 these two battalions and all the divisional artillery co-operated with

the South Africans in an assault on Triangle. The enemy withdrew during the night and by the morning our troops were completely surrounding the fortress and within assaulting distance. The Italians were hemmed in on all sides and were faced with a massacre should they continue to resist, though from their honeycomb of rock emplacements they were in a position, if stout hearted, to inflict many casualties on the attackers. But they had had enough. Emissaries were sent asking for an armistice, and after a little haggling the Italians surrendered.

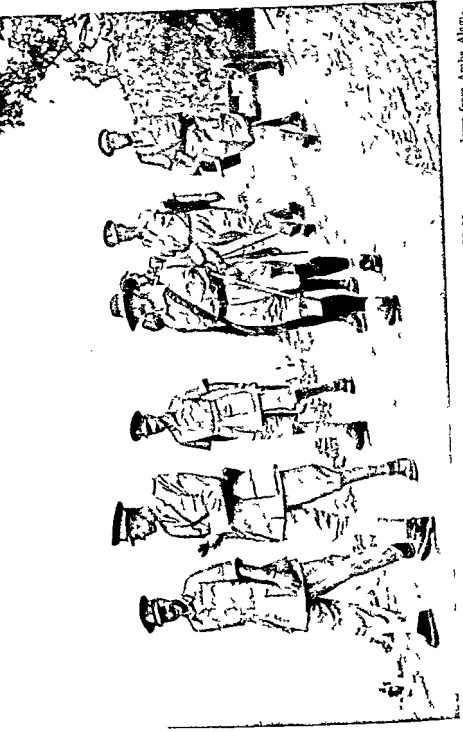
The enemy was granted "honours of war." The fortress with all its stores complete was handed over, and then the Italians under arms marched down the long winding road. While the victorious troops watched from the hill tops, the defeated army came down in a long column, eight abreast past the point where General Mayne took their salute. A few hundred yards further on was a guard of honour, composed of one platoon from each battalion, British, Indian and South African, which presented arms as the tired Italians marched by. A pipe band playing "The Flowers of the Forest" added to the pathos of the scene, as the vanquished troops filed into the village of Medani Alem and laid down their arms. It had been a very complete victory and a glorious end to a campaign, which will remain famous for its speed and the magnificent fighting of always outnumbered Imperial forces. The 5th Indian Division had advanced over 500 miles across deserts, up mountains, in burning heat and drenching rain, had taken part in the fearful battle of Keren, had won the fights at Barentu, Ad Teccesin and Massawa, and had taken prisoner more than twice its own numbers. Although there was mopping up to be done the campaign was over.



After ten days hard fighting the Guard of Honour marches into position to salute the vanquished Italians



who came down the twisting road to internment for the duration of the war



The Duke of Aosta Viceroy of Italian East Africa accompanied by Major General A. G. O. M. Mayne comes down from Amba Alagi.

# T E N

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## *Operations in the Red Sea*

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THE Royal Indian Navy has followed the tradition of her big sister, the Royal Navy. It is a silent service. There can be little publicity about naval operations in wartime for fear of giving the enemy information which may be of value. Much of the work carried out is utterly boring; long days and nights at sea when nothing of interest may happen but with the ever present danger of sudden and unheralded attack. Only occasionally the exploits of particular ships are heard of, but all the time hundreds of vessels, big and small, are carrying on their vital task. The work is arduous, and the hours long. H.M.I.S. *Indus*, Commander E. G. Hunt, R.I.N., was at sea for 223 days in one year and steamed over 33,000 miles in that period. This warship investigated no less than 435 British and foreign ships in the first six months of the war.

The entry of Italy into the war in June 1940 brought the Red Sea into the immediate zone of hostilities. The protection of convoys on the way to the Middle East became of the highest importance. Ships carrying troops, war material and oil had to be escorted for long distances without easy striking reach of the enemy sea and air base.

and yet not one transport was lost. On one occasion Italian destroyers attacked a large convoy, but were driven off. One enemy warship was forced ashore and destroyed, but by some extraordinary twist the Italians sought to gain more honour by announcing that she had been "scuttled". It is bad luck not to be even credited with having put up a fight. But the escorting of convoys was only a part of the duties of the Royal Indian Navy. Patrols, minesweeping and operations with the land forces, were other duties. H M I S *Hindustan*, Commander G V G Beamish, R I N, was present at the evacuation of Berbera in August 1940. Her 3 pounder guns were landed with naval crews and were in action during the withdrawal.

With the success of the land operations against the Italians, the rôle of the naval forces included an increasing number of offensive operations, mainly in conjunction with the army against enemy ports and coastal positions. H M I S *Ratnagiri* set off by assisting the landing at Mersa Taclai early in February, a most difficult task amongst the coral reefs.

### *Berbera*

On the same day that the great attack on Keren began Indian troops took part for the first time in a combined operation with the Royal Navy, the Royal Indian Navy and the Royal Air Force, entailing a landing on a coast held by the enemy. It was known that the Italians had removed most of their garrison from British Somaliland, owing to the threat from our forces advancing from Mogadishu, but there were still at least 2,000 men in Berbera, while there was a considerable number of bomber and fighter aircraft at Dire Dawa.

The main landing was carried out by the 2nd and 15th Punjab Regiment supported by naval

vessels, which bombarded the enemy positions from the sea. The naval bombardment was replied to by guns and machine guns firing at the boats conveying the troops ashore, but the ships soon dealt with that, so effectively, in fact, that the enemy started to go. The 15th Punjab Regiment was carried by H.M.L.S. *Parvati*, Lieutenant H. M. Choudri, R.N., which also towed a tug and barge for the landing. The ship was straddled by three four inch shells, which fell close, but the landing was carried out without loss. There was little opposition, and the enemy retired as soon as our troops began to advance.

The 2nd Punjab Regiment then landed, and advanced through the 15th Punjab Regiment towards the town, while at the same time some of the latter moved inland from the coast to try to cut the road. Berbera was soon occupied, the enemy streaming away down the road towards Hargeisa, and the search for booby traps, stores and weapons began. The enemy had been completely surprised and fled without doing any damage, though the town was in a disgusting state. Sanitation had been completely neglected, the flies were there in clouds, the town, which is not normally a very salubrious place, stank to heaven. About 120 prisoners with ten guns were captured, while Indian casualties were one man wounded. The most difficult operation of war had been carried out against an admittedly not very determined foe, with complete success, inflicting losses on the enemy and recapturing the town which was to provide a base for future operations. The Italian venture in British Somaliland had been an expensive luxury.

### *Massawa*

The naval operations against Massawa, which took place at the same time as the attack down the

It now became a naval action, and so the Sub Lieutenant took command with the rating acting as his second in command. In some very rickety dug out canoes, a boarding party was sent off to another empty dhow which was only 200 yards from the shore. Sail was set and the boat manoeuvred, not without difficulty, towards the Italian dhow. As the two ships approached, the havildar trained the machine gun on the Italians, though it is doubtful if a hit would ever have been obtained, for the wild pitching and rolling of the dhow made aiming an impossibility. Nevertheless white flags appeared at the mast and the stern, and a prize crew of one went off in the rickety canoe to board the enemy ship.

And what a prize it was! On board was one Italian Governor (a particular "buddy" of Il Duce), one general, two colonels and various A.D.Cs, but the importance of these paled into insignificance when the cargo was examined. Many canvas bags filled to the brim with Maria Theresa dollars were stacked in the dhow. The prisoners were transferred to the British (*pro tem*) dhow, and the prize crew sailed the captured ship with all its booty round the island to rejoin the *Ratnagiri*.

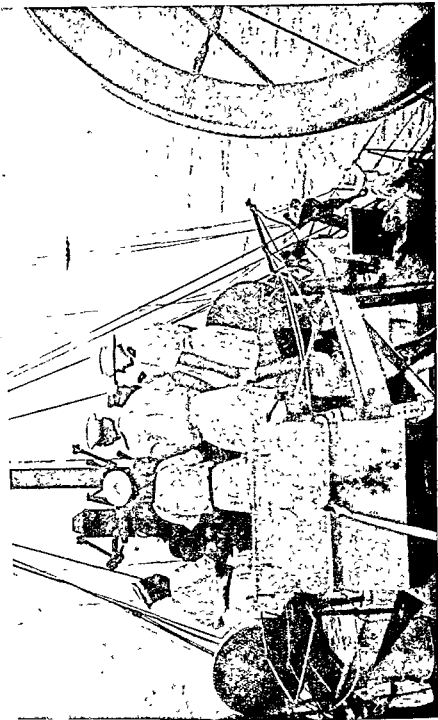
### *Cape Guardafui*

Towards the end of April, with the usual mine sweeping precautions, H M I ships entered a tiny fishing port on the coast of Italy in Somaliland which had been captured the previous day by Punjabis. A small military force was embarked and the ships moved down the coast to the vicinity of Cape Guardafui, the most easterly point of Africa. H M I S *Clive* anchored off the lighthouse shortly after daybreak. A party of Italian soldiers was





rest may happen but with the ever present danger of sudden and unheralded attack



'The R.A.N. co-operates with the R.A.F. in keeping the Red Sea open for our shipping.

quickly dispersed by a few rounds from a 2 pounder gun. Then the force was landed, a highly unpleasant job in native surf boats through rough water. While one warship sailed along the coast in support of the military searching for the enemy, another landed a party and occupied the lighthouse. By nightfall the light was working again after ten months' inactivity.

Meanwhile the Punjabis had found the enemy and asked for a naval bombardment next morning. Just when the ship was about to open fire the Italians surrendered. Yet another landing party went ashore further down the coast and all the remainder of the enemy were rounded up. Thirty Italian officers and 154 other ranks were taken away as prisoners from this inhospitable stretch of coast.

### *Assab*

Assab lies on the Red Sea coast commanding the Straits of Babel Mandeb. It was the first place in Africa to be occupied by the Italians and consists of a small harbour with a well laid out town behind. The aerodrome had long since been thoroughly dealt with by our bombers, and was littered with the usual collection of burnt out and destroyed aeroplanes.

Early in June an attack was staged from the sea and was phenomenally successful. Our forces sustained no casualties whatsoever. One Italian was killed, while more than a thousand including some Germans were captured. Large numbers of rifles and machine guns with ammunition were also secured, and so complete was the surprise that very little damage was done to the harbour installation.

It was known that the approaches to the port had been heavily mined, so the naval escort and the

transport anchored some nine miles off shore leaving the landing to be carried out by men of the 15th Punjab Regiment. In the early morning just before sunrise the landing party set out in fast motor boats, each manned by naval ratings, and containing 30 picked men, and headed for the pier in the middle of the town. Punctually at the pre-arranged minute aircraft arrived to assist in the operation. Flying very low, they drowned the sound of the motor boat engines with the roar of their own, and so enabled the boats to creep up to the quay unobserved.

A tug, with a 12 pounder gun, had been placed in such a position that she could sink herself and block the only remaining bit of pier, but the Italians, quite unaware of the danger, were all asleep. Even the sentry had to be rudely awakened by a poke in the ribs with a revolver. The pier and buildings were quickly occupied and a few more prisoners added to the bag.

As soon as the motor boats reached the quay an aeroplane dropped a letter on the Residency calling on the Italian Governor to come down to the pier and surrender. This he did. If ever the phrase "according to plan" was justified, this was a splendid example for the letter had been written some days previously and sent to Aden where it was handed over to the pilot. The Governor and the civil officers of the town were taken out to the cruiser, which was approaching through the lane swept by minesweepers. Soon the remainder of the battalion were being landed and the occupation of the town was completed.

There was little opposition, though some Italian ratings offered resistance and damaged the wireless station. Otherwise the attitude was one of resignation and relief that it was all over. There

was little food left in the town, and the undying gratitude of mothers was earned when a supply of milk for their babies was flown from Aden. It had been an easy victory but, if surprise had not been attained, Assab might have been a hard nut to crack. Situated in bare rocky desert, the houses are modern and well built and practically every one contained a machine-gun.

This was the last Italian position on the coast of Italian East Africa, and the Red Sea was at last freed from the menace on its western shore.

# ELEVEN

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## *Mechili*

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THE 3rd Indian Motor Brigade moved up into Cyrenaica from Egypt after the capture of Benghazi by General Wavell's army in March 1941, in order that some of the forces who had taken part in the advance might get some rest, while others were freed to go to Greece. Some troops had been continuously in action from June 10, 1940, under as arduous and trying conditions as it is possible to imagine. As a result of these reliefs a smaller force was left in the captured country, the main body being at Benghazi itself. The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade was at El Adem, the aerodrome of Tobruk and the graveyard of 87 burnt out or damaged Italian aeroplanes.

At the end of March Germans and Italians in overwhelming numbers attacked the armoured troops 100 miles south of Benghazi, forcing the Imperial troops to withdraw along the coast road towards Cyrene, Derna and Tobruk and across the desert. The Germans then sent a large armoured force to the south of the coastal mountains by way of Mechili to try to cut off the troops, retreating along the road, before they could reach Tobruk. This was the route followed by British armoured

forces in advancing from Derna to Benghazi, when the retreating Italian forces were intercepted and all killed or captured in a fierce battle south of Benghazi. Mechili is the only place at which water can be obtained on this route and so it was of first importance. As the only mobile troops available, the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade was sent out to hold this place and so delay the Germans sufficiently to enable the Cyrenaica garrison on the coast road to get safely back into Tobruk.

El Mechili lies 100 miles west of Tobruk, right out in the desert; a little stone and mud fort, quite useless for defence, was the only building for many *many miles in every direction*. *Imagine a saucer of sand nine miles in diameter with a rocky uneven edge running up in places to a height of 800 feet.* To the west the saucer edge is broken away and there the country is flat and open. The fort is about a couple of miles from the northern rim, while rather more than half-way across is a landing ground, or what passes for one in the desert. The fort itself, which contains the wells, had trenches dug round it by the Italians, but after the winter storms they were silted up with sand. A desolate, forbidding place it is normally visited only by a few wandering Bedouins, but by a strange chance it now became for a short time the most important spot in North Africa, after which it relapsed once more into its normal loneliness until December 1941.

Except for a casual machine-gun attack made in passing by two Messerschmidts bound elsewhere on other business, the move on April 4 was uneventful. The brigade, with which were some Australian anti-tank gunners and a few British infantry from the Rifle Brigade, spent that night and the next day trying to put the four mile

perimeter into a state of defence, clearing the old trenches and digging new ones

### *The Enemy Arrives*

During the night of April 5-6 patrols contacted the enemy some 15 miles to the south west. Vehicles with lights burning and presumed to be hostile were also reported some five miles away to the north west. However since news had reached the brigade that armoured reinforcements could be expected very shortly, there seemed no great cause for alarm, until in the early hours of the morning vehicles of the transport company bumped the enemy to the east of Mechili. The incident passed off satisfactorily enough, for a rotund but determined captain, with three vehicles, five men and no arms except a pistol and three broken Italian rifles, brought in an officer, six men and a Breda gun, having captured them by driving straight at them.

But what were Italians doing 15 miles east of Mechili on the road to Tobruk?

The morning of April 6 was quiet until about noon when suddenly 14 very large enemy aircraft appeared over the escarpment from the north, followed the line of it round and landed on the aerodrome. They were rightly taken to be birds of ill omen. Within a few minutes a patrol reported that there was a large enemy column, with guns, on the aerodrome, while another party had been seen moving along the southern escarpment apparently working round to the east to cut the line of retirement.

Since the brigade had no heavier artillery than 2 pounder anti tank guns, nothing could be done about all this. When, however, vehicles drawing field guns moved north from the aerodrome,



towards the fort, the Australians opened fire on them and they promptly retired, although they were a good 600 yards out of range. One gun was, however, brought closer, and a machine gun section of the P A V O Cavalry\* was sent out to deal with it. Unfortunately the gun was quickly switched round, and the first shell, at a range of just over 1,000 yards, knocked out the gun, killing or wounding some of the crew. Thereupon an officer of the regiment at once jumped into his truck, drove out towards the gun, picked up the survivors and brought them back.

Meanwhile the enemy moved up a heavy howitzer and began to shell the fort area, a proceeding which greatly increased the cavalry's hitherto rather moderate enthusiasm for digging. This curiously confused situation continued. Two heavy enemy lorries drove up to the east side of the camp. The P A V O allowed them to approach within 600 yards, when fire was opened. The foremost lorry went up in flames and out of the two of them jumped over 40 Italians and two German officers. Out went three trucks and brought them in together with a gun. Shortly afterwards another German officer and three German other ranks were ingeniously captured by an officer, when he allowed a staff car to pursue him up to a point where he knew it was covered by machine guns.

So far the defence was rather more than holding its own, but there was still no sign of the armoured forces coming to help, and the enemy was becoming bolder. Four armoured cars tried to force their way in from the south west, being driven off by a patrol of the 2nd Royal Lancers, while a gun was established to the east which began

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\* Prince Albert Victor's Own Cavalry (11th Frontier Force)

to shell the lines. This was also driven off by a patrol of the P A V O, who nearly captured it. The enemy kept on trying to drive in from the west until nightfall, but was foiled by machine gun fire.

There was no sleep for anyone that night, but the enemy had been kept from the vital water for 24 hours.

Early on the morning of April 7 a British aircraft came over to drop a message informing the brigade that it was surrounded on all sides and that strong enemy columns were moving up on the east and south. Since the brigade had already observed between 30 and 40 enemy lorries to the east and had counted 12 guns in view not more than 4,000 yards away, this unwelcome news was not altogether unexpected. Confirmation was speedily provided. A German staff officer drove into the position under a white flag in a Mercedes Benz touring car, plated shoulder high with  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch armour. Speaking perfect English and behaving with the greatest correctness he demanded an unconditional surrender. He pointed out that it would be a perfectly honourable arrangement, since the brigade was surrounded by immensely superior forces and would be bombed and shelled to pieces if it tried to hold out.

The reply was a refusal by the brigadier to consider such a proposal, and a heartening raid by 11 British aircraft which bombed the aerodrome thoroughly.

The next move by the enemy was the advance from the south of two very large lorries, each containing a gun in the back. A direct hit from an anti tank rifle brought the first to a standstill, and out poured Italians with their hands up. While the 2nd Royal Lancers and P A V O were disputing

whose birds they were, the Australian anti tank gunners slipped out with a break down truck, and brought in both lorries, one German and two Italian officers, two German NCO's and about 20 Italian other ranks. The bag was increased when a staff car approached too near and was captured with a German officer inside. Thus far the "honourable surrenders" had been so one sided that when the envoy returned again at noon to point out that the brigade was now surrounded by guns with a large number of tanks, his demand for a bloodless victory was again refused.

### *The Break Out*

Nevertheless the brigade was surrounded by guns and by vastly superior forces. Militarily its position was obviously untenable.

Determined to make the situation clear the enemy opened a heavy bombardment with guns and mortars, which continued until sunset. For 20 minutes there was peace. Then infantry attacks began. A half hearted effort from the west was easily beaten off. A much more determined attempt from the north was pressed for nearly an hour, until the Italians gave way under withering machine gun fire, leaving many dead on the ground. Two tanks which tried to creep in from the south were also driven off by direct hits. About 10.30 p.m. the enemy gave it up and once again the bombardment started. Meanwhile the prisoners were getting "uppish", attacking our troops from the rear, but a jemadar, although wounded, soon "liquidated" them with his own revolver and with an Italian pistol he had picked up.

It was then decided to try to break through the enemy lines to the south at dawn. This meant

passing directly in front of a line of guns to the east of the camp. A squadron of the 18th Cavalry\* with the one cruiser tank and the ten armoured carriers were therefore detailed to deal with these. The remainder of the night was spent in preparation and beating off two more infantry attacks, but owing to the confusion and noise inevitable in getting such a large number of vehicles ready to move, the enemy must have had a very good idea of what was about to happen.

At about 6.50 a.m. in the half light the squadron under the command of Captain J. M. Barlow charged the guns from the north east. The assault, as hopeless it must have seemed as the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, roared in. The tank was knocked out straight away, but the 24 trucks drove straight down in line on the guns, split half to the right and half to the left, halted and the men went in with the bayonet. The gun crews threw up their hands. After destroying four out of the five guns the squadron embussed and made off having suffered only 27 casualties out of the hundred who took part. The charge of the 18th Cavalry at Mechili takes its place with the other famous and desperate charges in history.

Meanwhile, under cover of this most gallant diversion, the main body attempted to break through to the south. It was just daylight, but clouds of dust, pierced only by the glare of bursting shells, the red streak of tracer bullets and the flames of burning trucks, reduced visibility to a few yards, while the crash of gunfire, the rattle of machine guns, and the howl of fast "revving" engines deafened and bewildered. To proceed as a formed body was impossible. Soon the trucks

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\* 18th King Edward VII's Own Cavalry

were driving through the enemy lines like a herd of stampeding cattle, swerving to right and left as they ran into obstacles or into the mouths of the enemy guns. Many never got through, but many more did.

Though all was chaos and confusion this was not a panic-stricken rout but a determined effort to get out to fight another day. So soon as the enemy's positions were passed trucks stopped to take the corks in tow. The wounded were picked up, and although many vehicles were overloaded to double their capacity, with enemy tanks and armoured cars scouring the countryside in search, there was no thought of leaving anyone behind.

Inside the camp exciting events were occurring. The 2nd Royal Lancers were left to act as rearguard, and just before starting a strong tank attack overwhelmed regimental headquarters and some of the squadrons. Under command of Major Rajendrasinhji one squadron with a few British infantry and Australian anti-tank gunners broke out to the west, charging through the enemy's guns. The enemy gunners threw up their hands, but there was no time to take prisoners. Scurrying on due west, the party then evaded pursuit by turning northwards into the hills where they lay up for the remainder of the day in the deep dry watercourses. Next night they drove south for 40 miles, then taking an easterly course they set out towards Egypt. Twice they encountered parties of the enemy, all of whom were captured but only a few of whom could be retained. In each case the Germans were selected, bundled into a captured lorry, and taken along. Finally they reached our lines, tired out, but safe again.

It is impossible to tell all the stories of the small parties which trickled back across the desert to safety. Wonderful navigating in this featureless desert was the hall mark of this part of the operation. The great fighting spirit of the troops is shown by the fact that few parties arrived without prisoners. The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade had lost many, including the brigadier, but it had a large proportion to go into action again, and it had the satisfaction of knowing that its heroic action had allowed the main forces to reach Tobruk.

# TWELVE

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## *The Syrian Campaign*

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WITH the attack on Crete and the penetration of Germans into Syria and Iraq, together with the increasingly complacent view taken of these operations by the Vichy Government, it became necessary for British forces to occupy Syria. Early in June, therefore, British forces began to advance into Syria and the Lebanon from Palestine. The only Indian force engaged was a brigade of the 4th Indian Division with attached troops, which since their return from Eritrea had been once more in the Western Desert.

It was hoped that the Vichy forces would not offer any resistance to this advance and, in order to give every opportunity for the avoidance of bloodshed, each move was preceded by an emissary carrying a white flag. These tactics were in no case successful, but they account for the slow rate of advance at the beginning of the campaign.

On the night of June 8, the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade crossed the border along the road to Deraa and Damascus. At one point just over the frontier the railway crosses a large viaduct, and it was

known that this had been prepared for demolition. This was a bridge which Lawrence tried to destroy in 1918, in order to hamper any retirement by the Turks in face of Allenby's final offensive. The attempt then failed owing to one of the party dropping a rifle. A small party of one platoon of the Rajputana Rifles under the command of Captain Adam Murray was ordered to secure the bridge and prevent its destruction. The little party made its way across the frontier at night, and, on arrival at the bridge, Murray started forward alone to deal with the Vichy party guarding the explosive charges under the bridge. His platoon havildar, Goru Ram, insisted on accompanying him and these two made their way up to the post, cut their way through the wire, and crawled inside. The sentry's attention was attracted but he apparently thought that the intruders were dogs. He picked up a stone and threw it. Presumably because they did not howl or run away, his suspicions were well and truly aroused. The bolt of his rifle clicked and Murray and Goru Ram waited for no more. They charged the tent and sentry at once, with their tommy gun in action, and wiped out the whole post. The sound of the shots was the signal for the remainder of the platoon to rush the two guard posts on top of the viaduct and capture them, and so the Chehab viaduct was saved.

During the same night the Royal Fusiliers moved up on the west side of the Lake of Tiberias to seize the important road junction at Quneitra. This they did with little opposition and secured the town two days later.

The Rajputana Rifles and the 1st Punjab Regiment were ordered to surround Deraa during the night. The Punjabis moved up to the south of the town while the "Rajrif" moved right round to the





General Sir Archibald Wavell watching operations near Damascus from a hill top



north. This was a most difficult march across country, but in spite of some opposition the battalion was in position to the north of the village by daybreak.

At about 6 a.m. a party under a white flag motored up to the town in a staff car. A shell from a French 75 pierced the bonnet of the car completely wrecking it, but fortunately did not explode. Then three brave officers got out of the car and walked into the village still bearing their white flag, but the parleys were of no avail and at 7 a.m. the attack started. It was completely successful and later on in the morning, the Rajputana Rifles carried on up the road towards Sheikh Miskine.

This advance was opposed by Vichy armoured cars and also by aerial attack, but the regiment moved along the narrow road without much delay. Next day Sheikh Miskine was reached and here again the Vichy forces refused to surrender. An attack was mounted on the village but was stopped by intense machine-gun and artillery fire. A new plan was made by which one company went round on the left flank to try to seize a small hill overlooking the village. The company had been reduced to a strength of only two platoons and the leading platoon was held up in the open plain only 350 yards from the hill by very heavy machine-gun fire. The reserve platoon was then put in. Naik Bhopal Singh, who had taken over command when both his platoon commander and havildar had become casualties, led this attack in most determined fashion. He and three others reached the position, and annihilated the entire post, and then they rushed on to attack another. These "Bahadurs" killed over 40 men between them. This enabled the other platoon to advance and the whole position was captured. The gallant action

by the Naik undoubtedly saved his whole company, for tanks had appeared in the open country and would have wiped out the little force. As a result of the capture of the hill, Sheikh Miskine capitulated.

The two battalions were now detailed to watch the desert flank while Free French forces passed through towards Damascus. Some days later the enemy was met in a strong position along the line of the river Nahr el Ouaj and so the Punjab and Rajputana Rifles were moved up to assist.

### *The Capture of Kissoue*

On the night of June 14-15 the Allied forces had reached the line of the river Nahr el Ouaj, the hills south east of Kissoue having been captured by Free French troops after hard fighting two days before. The 1st Punjab Regiment and 6th Rajputana Rifles were facing the Vichy positions opposite Kissoue (pronounced Kiswe), and were commanded by Lieutenant Colonel L. Jones, D.S.O., in the absence of the Brigadier W. L. Lloyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., who was in command of the whole force since General le Gentilhomme had been wounded. The Royal Fusiliers were at Quneitra, with one company thrust well forward along the road to Damascus, but not in touch with the enemy.

The battalions had fought in the stony plain of the Western Desert, the scrub covered country of eastern Eritrea and the precipitous mountains of Keren, but now they had got another type of terrain over which to operate. This part of Syria is rolling downland studded with innumerable lava boulders. These not only make it impossible for wheeled traffic to leave the roads, but also render it extremely difficult for infantry. A few hours

marching cuts the boots to pieces. The boulders do, however, very considerably reduce the risk of attacks by enemy armoured fighting vehicles, except in the area bounded by Qatana, Aartouz, Kissoue and Qumech Charatite.

The Vichy forces, which were about equal in numbers to the attackers, but very considerably superior in tanks and armoured cars, held an extremely strong position. On the west there were no hills worthy of the name, but gardens and houses provided ample cover for infantry and tanks, and the bulk of the enemy mobile troops were concentrated in this area. West of the village of Najha rose the Jebel Abou Artiz, almost sheer, and its continuations the Jebel el Kelb and the Jebel Tannouriye, boulder strewn, precipitous hills, well fortified and strongly garrisoned. West of the main road was Tel Kissoue, a big rounded hill, free of lava on its lower slopes, with Tel Afair north of it. Finally, even further west was the great hill of Jebel Madam commanding both the road from Deraa and that from Quneitra. Though these hills do not compare with the mountains of Eritrea they are nevertheless very serious obstacles.

Behind the hills is a bare patch, north of which are the gardens—an intricate area, criss crossed by irrigation channels, the orchards, cactus hedges and houses providing a mass of positions for machine gun nests and hiding places for tanks. The gardens, which surround Damascus, are thinnest near the Quneitra Road, to the west of which is another line of high hills surmounted by four forts overlooking all the low country.

A general attack across the river began before dawn on June 15. The Free French met with no success on the right, but their left captured part of

the Jebel el Kelb The two Indian battalions had the stiff task of capturing Kissoune itself and Tel Kissoune just behind The defences were strong The village had been thoroughly wired and was surrounded by an anti-tank trench 13 feet wide and 13 feet deep A number of posts were concealed on the outskirts, while within the village itself the many little orchards, intersected by swift flowing streams, were well wired and defended by machine guns The task of clearing the village was entrusted to one battalion, and in the hopes of attaining surprise they were given no artillery support Both battalions were brought up in lorries, and then the 1st Punjab Regiment moved forward to the attack

The night was quiet as the tomb as the men crept forward, equipped with hastily constructed scaling ladders to aid them across the ditch At 3 20 a.m. the stillness was suddenly broken by the chatter of machine guns and the explosions of bursting bombs The firing rose in a crescendo, to die away and then flare up again To the watchers at Brigade Headquarters it was an anxious moment The Free French had been extremely sceptical of the possibility of the attack succeeding "A direct attack without artillery preparation, tanks or air bombardment?" They shrugged their shoulders "And with one battalion?" They raised their hands and looked significantly at each other It was surely only their innate politeness that prevented them tapping their foreheads to indicate the insanity of the plan

Suddenly success signals went up and the firing died away in the village as the first grey of dawn appeared in the east The 1st Punjab Regiment had completely surprised the Vichy troops and after some heavy hand to hand fighting in the

village had captured the whole of it. The impossible had been achieved, though luck played its part. The garrison was in the middle of a relief, no attack was expected and many of the defenders' weapons were already loaded into lorries waiting for the arrival of the relieving troops. Mopping up continued amongst the orchards and little streams, many of which were six feet deep. After daylight several of the enemy troops were found hiding up to their necks in water and were hunted out.

At 5.15 a.m. our artillery began to register Tel Kissoué the peak behind the village, and the Rajputana Rifles went forward to attack at 9 a.m. This attack was every bit as formidable as the capture of the village, if not more so for now there was no question of surprise. The shelling was excellently directed and the troops, to whom this seemed child's play after Keien, went up the slopes in dashing style. By 9.50 a.m. Tel Kissoué was in the hands of the "Rajuf" after considerable fighting.

Meanwhile the Punjabis in Kissoué were being subjected to much shelling, and shortly after midday it was counter attacked by a Vichy battalion with tanks. This attempt was strongly pushed but failed owing to the Indians' excellent marksmanship and clever use of tank proof cover. Another assault also failed. Later still, the "charge" was heard sounded on trumpets, and from Tel Afur a squadron of Spahis came galloping. Across the plain they came, up the slopes of Tel Kissoué. But the men from Rajputana were as staunch as against tanks and the horsemen retreated leaving many dead and wounded on the ground. No wonder prisoners were depressed, for they had considered the position impregnable, and were now unable to

recapture it. These two battalions had done an amazing thing. A Vichy officer remarked "ce que vous avez faites, c'est incroyable. Vos Indiens sont vraiment formidable."

But the two battalions had not yet finished. After dark they started off north west to capture Jebel Madani, the 1st Punjab Regiment directed on the southern ridge and the Rajputana Rifles on the northern. The somewhat demoralised enemy did not expect a night attack, nor any attack at all so soon after the fall of Kissoué, and by dawn the two Indian battalions were in full possession of the hill looking forward and down on the city of Damascus itself. The confidence of the brigadier in his matchless battalions had not been misplaced.

Meanwhile on other fronts the situation was much less satisfactory. The Free French on the right flank were hard pressed, while at Quneitra the Royal Fusiliers were in a desperate plight. During June 15, the latter's outpost company had been driven in and a strong attack launched on them at this important road junction. During the night they were completely invested by a force strong in tanks and artillery. After desperate fighting, during which the one company which was not surrounded tried without avail to break its way in through the cordon, the Fusiliers ran out of ammunition and had no choice but to surrender.



It was hoped to stage an attack that might on Mezze down the road from Quneitra, while the Free French co operated with an advance down the main road towards Damascus. The latter, however, could not be got ready in time, and as the two Indian battalions were greatly exhausted, the attack was postponed for 24 hours. During this time information was received that a Vichy force had moved round the desert flank and was nearing Sheikh Miskine, and the force from Quneitra could also move east and cut the road behind our troops. But Brigadier Lloyd did not allow this serious news to alter his plans, he had appreciated that a real threat to Damascus would cause the enemy to withdraw these flanking forces. So next night the attack on Mezze began.

### *The Action at Mezze*

On the evening of June 18, the two Indian battalions set forth on what turned out to be one of the most heroic and desperate actions of the war. The plan was to pass right through the enemy lines during the dark and seize the village of Mezze, thus cutting the French line of retreat by road and rail to Beirut. The Free French were to co operate by attacking up the main road from Kissoué to Damascus. One company of the 1st Punjabis was left to hold Jebel Madani. The Battalion de l'Infanterie de Marine remained in Aartouz, but was to move up to Mezze at daybreak with the artillery and anti tank guns which could not go forward across country during the dark. The sole surviving company of the Fusiliers remained in reserve. The few tanks available had to be left to guard the exposed desert flank. After a day's full in active operations during which some of the tired troops managed to have a bathe in the various streams, all were in better condition to undertake



Meze House



Artillery in action in the desert on the way to Deir-az-Zor

On the other side of the road, the Hazara company of the Punjabis continued the advance, knocking out some enemy machine gun posts and side stepping others. By 11 p.m. they were through the first enemy line. In the pitch dark there was great confusion, and on one occasion two parties were only just prevented from attacking each other. But the officers, Viceroy Commissioned Officers and NCO's proved their worth when they quickly sorted out the situation and the advance once more started. In the meantime a disastrous event had happened. The transport column, moving along the road, outstripped the marching troops in the scrub. It bumped into a road block, covered by an anti-tank gun and machine guns. Some vehicles were knocked out, and the transport never rejoined the battalions. It was eventually pinned by enemy tanks and artillery in olive groves near the village, and its loss was the real cause of the tragedy to come.

There was further opposition near the aerodrome, but this was mainly ignored. The column pushed onwards, crossed to the east of the road and at 4.15 a.m. reached Mezze after a 12 mile march, against opposition, over unreconnoitred country and in utter darkness. This in itself was a military feat of outstanding brilliance but better was to follow.

At 4.30 a.m. the attack started. Three guns firing down the road were knocked out with tommy guns, two by Subadar Mohd Akbar of the Punjabis and the third by the "Rajrif". Again hell was let loose but the attack was not checked for a moment. In the straggling little village intense street fighting took place. A large ammunition lorry exploded, and in the light of the flames a Vichy tank could be seen in action. It was attacked

and set on fire. With bayonet and grenade the enemy were forced from the whitey brown houses and after an hour of this hard individual fighting the village was secured.

A company of the Rajputana Rifles passed round the village and cut the main Damascus Beirut Road, driving away a cavalry screen. They set fire to a petrol dump, turned back a train, destroyed several lorries on the road, beat back an attack by a whole battalion and in general created some panic in Damascus. At 9 a.m. they were attacked by five heavy tanks and retired in good order into Mezze.

The Free French forces, which were to have advanced down the main road, had never started. So at once the work was begun of putting the village into a state of defence. It was realised that very considerable forces would now be available to counter attack the village, and that there were large numbers of tanks to be brought against it. Road blocks were constructed across the entrances with baulks of timber, stones and wire. Brigade Headquarters, with one company from each battalion, and both Battalion Headquarters, were established in the grounds of a large house with a walled garden on the northern outskirts, known as Mezze House. The other companies made defended positions inside the village. All this time there was slight machine gun fire and occasional shelling which did not do much damage.

Mezze House was a large square building surrounded by a wall. Outside are orchards, with dense undergrowth, so that it was often not possible to see more than ten yards. Two roads run outside the orchards to east and west, and to the south east is a large square from which a drive

leads to the house. The garden wall was hurriedly loopholed, and the gateway barricaded.

Shortly after 9 a.m. Vichy tanks appeared and attacked the men preparing the road blocks. All through the morning attacks developed on the isolated defended localities, the tanks broke through into the village and the fighting was intense. The accurate fire of our men prevented the enemy infantry from coming in close, but the tanks were all round and just outside the houses firing through the windows and walls. About 4 p.m. one of the companies of the Rajputana Rifles had to surrender. It had suffered many casualties and had run out of ammunition. But the walls of the buildings had to be knocked down by the great 35-ton tanks, before these heroes capitulated.

In the meantime the attacks continued, and alternated with heavy guns on the hills above shelling the village over open sights. During the afternoon the assault was concentrated on Mezza House, to which as many men as possible from the other localities had been withdrawn. The garden wall provided a tank obstacle, though the tanks were able to fire down the drive from the square, a distance of possibly 200 yards. The house was used as a hospital for the wounded.

Attacks continued till nightfall when it was decided to send the news of the desperate state of the defenders back to Force Headquarters. As no transport had got through, ammunition was getting short. Except for a little fruit in the garden, which was doled out to all, no food had been eaten for 24 hours. There were about 50 prisoners also to be provided for. The number of wounded was large. Lieutenant Colonel H. E. Greatwood was mortally wounded causing this battalion of Punjab to lose

its commanding officer for the third time in its campaigning. Medical stores were finished, the doctor bandaging the wounded with strips of sheets taken from the beds in the house. But the wounded carried on fighting, some men coming back three times for bandaging and then returning to their posts.

A small party of one jemadar (in command) and two officers set off back to Force Headquarters at 8.45 p.m. It was going to be a very desperate venture for the village was full of Vichy infantry and tanks and the house was completely surrounded. The three crept through a hole in the wall and after dodging below a tank which was firing at the house, swam the stream just beyond. Thence they crept through a garden, crossed a lane immediately behind another tank and got up on the roof of a low house. They passed along the roofs of several houses, but in jumping down the jemadar hurt his ankle; the two officers helped him along. While skirting the wall of a garden they ran into an enemy post, the sentry of which fired at them point blank, but missed. Running back they tried another way, and climbing from garden to garden managed to get to the far side of the village. Behind them they could hear yet another attack taking place on Mezze House, while as they rested they watched by the flashes a counter attack taking place on the company of the 1st Punjab Regiment on the hill.

After leaving the village they crossed the road and went along in the foothills though their clothes were torn to shreds and their bodies lacerated by the cactus hedges through which they had to force their way. They felt almost happy at the thought that they were going to succeed. At half past five they reached Force Headquarters in a state of utter exhaustion.

Meanwhile in Mezze House things were not going well. All through the night the attacks continued, but were driven off by desperate fighting. Ammunition was getting woefully short, but the fire discipline of the troops was magnificent. Each shot was carefully aimed, not a round was wasted. On one occasion this policy of conserving every round enabled the enemy to get within bombing range of the house, and the first grenade burst in the window of a room on the second floor where Lieutenant Colonel Jones was holding a conference. The enemy were eventually driven off and the fight continued until at 1.30 p.m. the Vichy forces, having brought up 75's very close, started shelling the house at point blank range. Part of the roof collapsed and every able bodied man had to help rescue the wounded from under the debris. While this was happening the enemy scaled the walls, but for the last time were driven back.

The relieving column could be heard fighting its way up past Mouaddamiye. It was decided to ask for an armistice in order to evacuate the wounded, and then to continue the fight. Though ammunition was now finished it was hoped that this bluff would delay surrender until rescue arrived. But the enemy on sighting the emissary with the white flag, thought it was surrender and rushed the gate beside him. The remnants of a company of the Rajputana Rifles made a desperate attempt to cut their way out, but it was hopeless. All was over.

*It had been a fight the like of which can rarely have been seen before, and this gallant defence made possible the capture of Damascus next day. All the Vichy forces had been drawn off to concentrate against the defenders of Mezze, and so the Free French forces operating on the right were able to enter the town.*



One and a half companies of the 1st Punjab Regiment and two companies of the Battalion de l'Infanterie de Marine supported by the 1st Field Regiment were sent out to relieve the garrison. They fought their way along the foothills. The gunners advanced their guns with muzzles down and blasted a way through. The charge of the *1st Field Regiment at Damascus, where they always* had their guns in line with, sometimes even in advance of, the attacking infantry, is typical of the marvellous spirit of this great brigade. But when they reached the village, Mezze was silent and deserted. The battered garden walls and the damaged house, the burnt out tanks and the dead bodies were eloquent testimony to the terrific fight.

The remnants of the three battalions were not finished yet. After the fall of Damascus they continued to advance with the remainder of the Allied forces. Since the armistice, those who were captured have been released, and once again these three great fighting battalions are ready to be used wherever they may be sent. Some of the officers, both British and Indian, with some British NCO's, had an adventurous trip after their capture. Flown first to Athens and Salonica, they then proceeded by train to Marseilles by way of Belgrade, Munich and Lyons, catching sight of Berchtesgaden on the way. When the orders for release arrived, they sailed in a French liner from Marseilles to Beirut, and rejoined their units after a most interesting though unpleasant journey.

### *The Advance from Iraq*

While these heroic events were happening on the Palestine border, a force of Indian troops began its advance into Syria from Iraq. This part

of Syria is plain rolling desert, cut by the river Euphrates which forms a belt of green across the all pervading brown. The Indian column advanced on Deir ez Zor, while a British force moved on Palmyra. In neither case was opposition severe, except in respect of air attack which caused several casualties in men and vehicles. It became largely a question of surmounting administrative difficulties. Deir ez Zor—the “Convent in the Woods”—was once a favourite resort of Haïoun Al Raschid, and is now the principal town of East Syria. It is situated astride the river Euphrates, which at this point is spanned by picturesque bridges. To the south west is a long escarpment rising to some height from the plain and affording a natural and obvious line of defence.

The line of approach to the city from the south east could follow either the main road which lies along the Euphrates or strike across the open desert to the west. Both these routes were followed simultaneously. A motorised column of artillery and the 13th Lancers left the river and moved out into the desert. Nowhere is there any vestige of cultivation or dwelling. For mile upon mile this column crossed the brown inhospitable sand devoid of water and landmarks. In spite of the heat the column, by July 3, had reached a road running west from Deir ez Zor to Palmyra. The only opposition encountered had been some Vichy armoured cars which were soon put to flight and early that day the party had reached a point five miles north of the city on the road to Aleppo. Then after cutting the telegraph line, the whole force moved rapidly southwards on to the town. The surprise was complete. The armoured cars, with the troops and guns following, were able to enter the city with scarcely any opposition.

While this flanking movement was going on, the main force was advancing steadily from the south in the face of considerable but ineffective shelling. The sudden appearance of the desert column, however, demoralised the garrison and resistance soon ceased. Several enemy guns were captured. By midday Deir-ez-Zor was completely secured. Thereafter very little resistance was encountered by any columns and though there were constant bombing and low-flying attacks, yet the casualties suffered were not heavy. The advance continued to Raqqa, and although hostilities were suspended, advanced elements reached the Turkish frontier north of Aleppo.

*“ The Duck’s Bill ”*

Meanwhile another force had advanced into the “ Duck’s Bill ” in the north-east of Syria. This area is immediately south of the Turkish frontier, where it marches with the Syrian Province of Hasetche. Westward of Mosul the country opens onto broad undulating uplands stretching northwards to the foothills which form the vanguard of the Turkish highlands. The distant peaks can at times be seen dimly through the summer haze which everywhere enshrouds the landscape. The bleak arid deserts of further south have given place to

Kotchek some 70 miles west of Mosul. The village and station form an oasis in the middle of the plain, visible for many miles.

Two companies of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment with artillery and some armoured cars left Mosul late at night and by daylight were facing the village. The guns were placed in front of the station and a company sent round each flank. As the object was to secure the village with the minimum of force and without damage to the railway or locomotives, the column commander went forward to interview the Vichy commander. At first the latter refused to surrender but on hearing of the large force, which was coming against him, eventually withdrew leaving the village and station undamaged.

The rapid thrust continued at once and by the early morning of the next day the little force was deployed in front of the fort of Tel Aalo. Situated on a small eminence, it is well built and fortified, and commands the country for many miles around. Again the Vichy commander refused to surrender, but after a couple of rounds had been fired over the fort, he changed his mind. Three officers and 130 men were made prisoners and the advance continued.

The 13th Frontier Force Rifles had arrived as reinforcements and a cavalry post at Kubur el Bid was also captured. By 10.30 a.m. the day following the capture of Tel Aalo the column was facing the town and fortress of Kamechlie. Standing right on the Turkish frontier, this is a town of 12,000 inhabitants, encircled by a small stream. The Vichy commander, having declined to surrender, was told that unless the flag was hauled down by 11 a.m., the barracks and trenches would be bombarded. Fire was on the point of being opened.

when a message was received that the town and fortress would be surrendered if the commander were allowed to escape with what garrison he could muster. As the shelling might have caused damage *and distress to the civil population and as ricochets* might have landed in Turkish territory, the request was granted. By 12.30 a.m. the town and fortress were occupied.

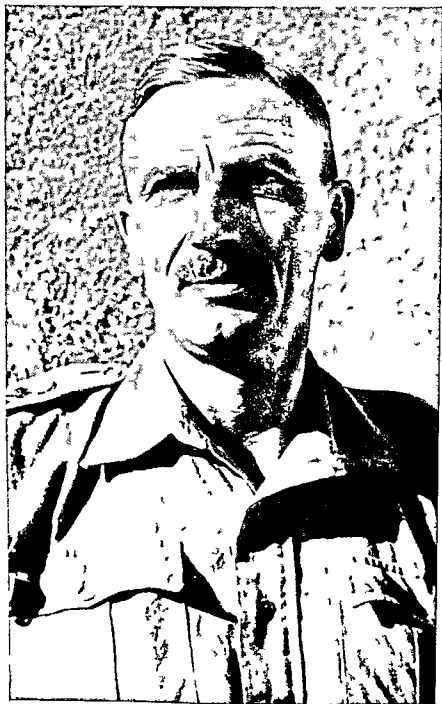
Much war material including valuable ordnance and medical stores and many tons of foodstuffs were captured, but the advance was not delayed. Next day Hasetche, the provincial headquarters, was occupied without opposition. This very rapid thrust had safeguarded the railway and constituted a threat to the rear of the Vichy positions. It must materially have assisted General Dentz to decide to ask for an armistice, which he did four days later.

\*     \*     \*     \*     \*

There, for the moment, we leave this story. How the Indian Tiger struck in the first phases of the war in Africa and Asia at Sidi Barrani, Gallabat, Agordat, Barentu, Keren, Massawa, Amba Alagi and Mezza are already memories as the war surges in greater strength not only into Asia from the west, but also under new garb from the Far East. Before it is ended there will be many more names to add to these battle honours of the Indian Army.



The fort at Tel Aalo



Brigadier W. L. Lloyd C.B.E., D.S.O. M.C. late 10th Hyderabad Regiment.  
"Ce que vous avez fait, c'est incroyable."

## APPENDIX

### *Awards*

The following list shows only those awards made for services in the Middle East to Officers and Other Ranks either serving on the staff with, or in units forming part of Indian Formations. It does not include those made to Officers and Men in units which were only temporarily attached to those Formations

### *Commands and Staff*

KBE and Mention	Lieut-General L M Heath, C.B, C.I.E, D.S.O, M.C (late 11th Sikh Regiment)
K.B.E	Lieut General N M de la P Beresford Peirse, D.S.O, A.D.C (late Royal Artillery)
CBE and D.S.O and a Bar to the D.S.O	Brigadier W L Lloyd, M.C (late 19th Hyderabad Regiment)
CBE and Mention	Brigadier C W Toovey, M.C (late 1st Punjab Regiment)
C.B.E	Major General A G O M Mayne, C.B, D.S.O (late Royal Deccan Horse)
	Brigadier C E N Lomax, D.S.O, M.C (late Welch Regiment)
	Colonel H F C McSwiney, D.S.O, M.C (late 2nd Gurkha Rifles)
	Colonel E J Shearer, M.C (late 3rd Gurkha Rifles)
Bar to the D.S.O	Brigadier T W Rees, C.I.E, D.S.O, M.C (late 6th Rajputana Rifles)
D.S.O and Mention	Major-General F W Messervy (late Hodson's Horse)
D.S.O	Brigadier R A Savory, M.C (late 11th Sikh Regiment)
	Brigadier H R Briggs (late 10th Baluch Regiment)
	Major G C Evans (Royal Warwickshire Regiment)
O.B.E	Lieut-Colonel E F E Armstrong (Royal Engineers)



Mentions	Major-General W J Shm, m c (late 6th Gurkha Rifles)
	Brigadier J C O Marriott, c v o, d s o, m c (late Scots Guards)
	Colonel E R S Dodge m c (late 4th Bombay Grenadiers)
	Lieut-Colonel L Monier Williams (late 3rd Gurkha Rifles)
	Major The Viscount Dalrymple (Scots Guards)

*Skinner's Horse*

MC	Captain R P Prentice
IO M	Risaldar Mohd Yunus Khan
IDS M	Risaldar Amar Singh
	6255 L/Daffadar Dip Chand
	6184 L/Daffadar Mohd Sharif Khan
	5516 Sowar Munshi Singh
	5575 Sowar Raj Singh
	5566 Sowar Sardar Singh

*2nd Royal Lancers*

D.S O	Major Raj Kumar Shri Rajendrasinhji
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*3rd Cavalry*

O.B E and Mention	Major H W Picken
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*15th Lancers*

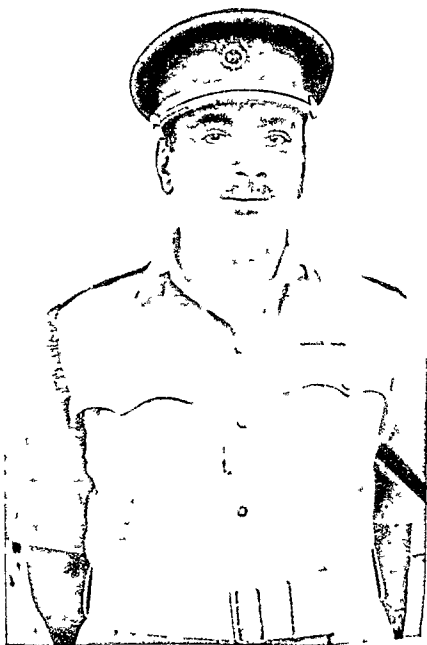
Mention	Major G R S Webb, m c
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*18th K E VII O Cavalry*

D.S O	Major H O W Fowler
MC	Captain J M Barlow
IO M	Jemadar Jage Ram
	Jemadar Aman Singh
IDS M	Risaldar Hasham Ali Khan
	6003 Sqn Daffadar-Major Kanshi Ram
	6198 L/Daffadar Bajid Khan
	7866 Sowar Jit Ram
	4816 Sowar Abhe Ram
	6606 Sowar Abdi Khan

*Central India Horse*

IO M	5080 L/Daffadar Ram Bhai
IDS M	5144 L/Daffadar Kapur Singh
	5272 Sowar Yad Ram



Major Raj Kumar Shri Rajendrasinhji, D.S.O., 2nd Royal Lancers  
A nephew of Ranji of cricketing fame



Jemadar Jowahir Singh, I.D.M., 6th Rajputana Rifles.  
A Rajputana Rajput from Jaipur State.

Mentions      Captain J H Gardner  
                  Lieutenant H F Howson  
                  Risaldar Imrat Singh  
                  Jemadar Narayan Singh  
                  5633 Sowar Mansafdar Khan

*Royal Artillery*

DSO              Brigadier W H B Mirrlees, M.C.  
                  Lieut.-Colonel J H Frowen

Bar to the  
 MC              Major A G Munn, M.C.

MC              Major K R L Hall  
                  Major G H Baker  
                  Major H S J Bourke  
                  Captain A E Gray  
                  Captain J H Gibson  
                  Captain P Smart  
                  Captain D C B L Esmonde White  
                  Captain T H Bevan  
                  Lieutenant G Sharratt

DCM             TSM J W Whitaker  
                  L/Bdr N R Savours

MM              Sgt H Leggett  
                  Sgt J Weardon  
                  Sgt W R Gooderidge  
                  Bdr V Wagstaff  
                  BSM E Cheseman  
                  Bdr R Jones  
                  L/Bdr R G Hole  
                  L/Bdr L G Steuart  
                  L/Bdr R L Barber  
                  Gunner F Gill  
                  Gunner C Perry  
                  Gunner M Cretchell  
                  Gunner P Southill  
                  Gunner G K Neale  
                  Signmn C Moore  
                  Signmn J MacMullen

*Indian Artillery*

IDSM	18610 L/Naik Bagga Singh
	42275 Sigmn Inayat Ullah
	41641 Sigmn Narain Singh
	15731 Naik Mohd Khan
	A/316 Sigmn Amar Singh

*Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners*

IOM	Subadar Subbarayan
	13996 CHM Sampangi Raj
IDSM	41110 L/Naik Balkrishna Yarundkar
Mention	13248 CHM Ramaswamy

*King George V's Own Bengal Sappers and Miners*

MC	Major J R H Platt
	Lieutenant M B Thomas
IOM	Jemadar Kiarat Singh
IDSM	12499 Sapper Kartar Singh
Mentions	Lieut Colonel A H G Napier
	Subadar Gheba Khan

*Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners*

Victoria Cross	2nd Lieutenant P S Bhagat
and Mention	
OBE	Lieut-Colonel H P Cavendish
MBE	Subadar Chet Singh
MC	Lieutenant C C Fraser
IOM	Subadar Rahmat Khan
IDSM	41025 L/Naik Gharib Singh
	40036 Havildar Said Akbar
Mentions	Major G E H Philbrick
	10316 Havildar Mohd Akbar

*Royal Corps of Signals*

DSO and Mention	Lieut-Colonel C M F White
MBE	Captain A P Dunn
MC	2nd Lieutenant V H S Martin
MM	Sigmn A Anchl
	Corporal J Flowers
	Sigmn G S M Bicker
	Sigmn B Robertson
	Sigmn J Morrison
	L/Cpl J Briggs

Mentions	Lieutenant E S Jones
	Sgt W Knox
	Sigmn R Langmaid
	Sigmn T Westover
	Sigmn A Hassell
	Sgt L O'Donnell
	Sigmn J Humphries
	Sigmn S Sutcliffe
	Sigmn R Boddington
	Cpl J French
	Sigmn D Hecquet
	Sigmn F Meek
	Sigmn S Hudd
	Sigmn G Head
	Sgt V Hylands
	Sgt F Archer

*Indian Signal Corps*

I O M	9213 Naik Jogindar Singh
M B E	Captain W J Applegate
	Subadar Jogindar Singh
I D S M	Jemadar Saiyid Zahir Hussain Shah
	9249 Havildar D Chandra Reddy
	8758 Naik Hazara Singh
	A/26 L/Naik Girdhara Singh
	9064 L/Naik Dharman
	A/58 L/Naik Deva Raj
	A/550 Sigmn Banta Singh
Mentions	Subadar Yakub Khan
	1066 Havildar Kaka Khan
	6270 Havildar Dhanna Singh
	4924 Naik Karam Singh
	A/182 Naik Titus
	9331 L/Naik Fattah Khan
	9615 Sigmn Achtien Mair
	A/969 Sigmn Kushlappa
	A/209 Sigmn Madhaven

*The Queen's Royal Regiment.*

M.M.	L/Cpl. E. Nash.
Mentions.	Captain C. E. Weatherall Hall.
	Captain H. R. D. Hill.
	Captain M. T. N. Jennings.
	2nd Lieutenant J. A. Robertson Walker.
	Sgt. H. Barker.
	Private R. Brinkhurst.
	Private W. Ridger.
	Private S. Harper.

*The King's Own Royal Regiment.*

M.C.	Captain P. J. H. Weir.
D.C.M.	Private J. McDermott.

*The Royal Fusiliers.*

M.C.	Captain T. P. Wilson.
	2nd Lieutenant R. Dexter.
	2nd Lieutenant C. R. V. N. Adams.
D.C.M.	Sgt. G. Chivers.
	Cpl. H. E. Cotton.
M.M.	Cpl. J. Horsefield.
	Cpl. L. Ginsberg.
	Fusilier G. Walsh.
	Sgt. W. Scorgie.
	Fusilier C. W. Dowsett.
	L/Cpl. J. McTeague.
Mentions.	Major B. E. M. Harding.
	Major H. C. Partridge.
	Captain J. P. Searight.
	2nd Lieutenant R. A. H. Lawrence.
	R.S.M. F. R. Gardner.
	Col. Sgt. C. Hartland.
	Sgt. J. Finch.
	Fusilier J. Sale.
	Fusilier L. Goff.
	Fusilier H. White.
	Drummer L. Haylock.

*The West Yorkshire Regiment.*

M.C.	Major M. A. C. Osborn.
	Lieutenant J. A. Williams.
	2nd Lieutenant C. H. Rieu.
	2nd Lieutenant P. L. Birch.
	2nd Lieutenant J. D. Morgan.

DCM Sgt J B C Thorneley  
 MM CSM, F Davis  
 Cpl E Collinson  
 Cpl F Henighan  
 L/Cpl J Goulding  
 Cpl F Fretwell  
 Pte W Mulcahy

*The Leicestershire Regiment*

MC Major A L Novis  
 Lieutenant J W Bryan  
 DCM Cpl T S Richardson  
 MM Cpl W Denby  
 PSM L Hollins  
 Mentions Lieut Colonel C H V Cox  
 Captain D S Carden  
 Captain J H Marriott, MC  
 2nd Lieutenant R F Chalmers  
 2nd Lieutenant W E Peck  
 PSM F Shardlow  
 Cpl C Davidson  
 Cpl D P Gallacher  
 Pte J Barker  
 Pte F J Wright  
 Pte W King  
 Pte F Fox

*The Worcestershire Regiment*

MC Captain T J Bowen  
 MM Sgt J Keohane  
 Pte G Stephens  
 Pte A Mander  
 Pte W Sheldon  
 Mention Lieutenant A H Cooper

*The Royal Sussex Regiment*

MC Captain P M J Harrison  
 Captain D W Gayland



DCM.	Cpl A Talmey
MM	Cpl J de Ville
	Sgt E K Conroy
	Pte J Cunningham
	Pte S H Young

*The Highland Light Infantry*

MC	Captain T R M Hare
	Captain P St H Maxwell
	Captain P T Telfer Smollett.
DCM	CSM W McMillan
MM	Cpl J Anderson
	Pte F Lumley
	Pte P Bailie

*The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders*

DSO and	2nd Lieutenant A J Cochrane
MC	
DSO	Lieut-Colonel A Anderson, MC
	Captain D Douglas
MC	Captain I B Robertson
	Lieutenant A G Cameron
	2nd Lieutenant J F MacKinnon
DCM	Sgt H A Brown
	L/Sgt W Scobie
	L/Cpl S Gray
	Pte M Smith
MM	Pte T McKirdy
	Pte D Brown
	Pte A McBain
	Pte J MacDonald
	Pte M Moon
	L/Sgt R Davidson
	L/Cpl H Bush
Mentions	Major R M Neilson
	Captain C A H Noble
	Lieutenant A G Cochrane.
	PSM W McBride
	Pte B Finlay

*The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders*

DSO	Lieut-Colonel R C G Anderson, MC
MC	Lieutenant A F Down



Lieutenant-Colonel A Anderson D.S.O. M.C. The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders.

"A couple of tanks and the Colonel and we'll go anywhere."



Subadar Major Ata Mohamed : D.S.M., 1st Punjab Regiment.  
A Hazarawal from the North West Frontier Province.

Bar to the DCM MM	CSM P McPhillips, DCM Pte D Fraser Cpl J Carruthers Pte W Fraser Cpl W Orr Sgt E Harcourt Bandsman C Boyd
Mentions	Lieutenant E T Titmarsh 2nd Lieutenant A J Aldridge CSM J Hare CSM R Slater Sgt H Balentine L/Sgt L Planner Cpl D Southwell Cpl C Jarvis L/Sgt H Evans Pte R Moyes Pte J Smith Drummer J McPhee Pte W McKay Pte H Blumeris

*1st Punjab Regiment*

DSO	Lieut-Colonel W A Whitehead
OBE	Lieut-Colonel J B Dahson
MBE and Mention	Subadar-Major Rahmat Ullah
MC and Mention.	Captain C J Boulter Lieutenant P R Shoosmith
MC	Captain R N D Frier Captain J A G Harley Captain J A Robertson Lieutenant P J Petit 2nd Lieutenant J C Leach 2nd Lieutenant M V Glasikin
IOM	Subadar Dogar Singh Subadar Mohd Akbar Jemadar Bhagat Singh 8571 Havildar Kalyan Singh 10182 Havildar Khana Zaman 12893 Sepoy Sabit Ullah

IDSM

Subadar Atta Mohd  
 Jemadar Mohd Sher  
 6617 Havildar Natha Singh  
 10184 Havildar Abdul Aziz  
 8604 Havildar Harnath Singh  
 7363 Havildar Kala Khan  
 10814 Havildar Mohd Alam Khan  
 11540 Havildar Rasul Khan  
 8461 Havildar Sapuran Singh  
 10607 Havildar Abbas Khan  
 7680 Naik Abdul Rahman  
 9894 Naik Bachan Singh  
 11838 Naik Dost Mohd  
 10476 Naik Sardara Singh  
 10312 L/Naik Sultan Singh  
 11565 Sepoy Karam Singh  
 11353 Sepoy Baghrawat Singh  
 13974 Sepoy Bakhtawar Singh  
 7896 Sepoy Fazal Rahman  
 13682 Sepoy Mahmud Khan  
 12471 Sepoy Mir Ahmad  
 11538 Sepoy Sardara Singh  
 Major D I Morrison  
 Captain P A R Reyne  
 Subadar Ujagar Singh  
 10548 Naik Mohd Ayan  
 9894 L/Naik Bachan Singh  
 10643 L/Naik Mangu Singh

Mentions

*2nd Punjab Regiment*DSO and a  
Bar to the  
DSO

Lieut-Colonel B H Chappel

DSO

Lieut-Colonel F A M B Jenkins, OBE,  
MC

MC

Captain D A Trout  
Captain B R Pearson

IOM

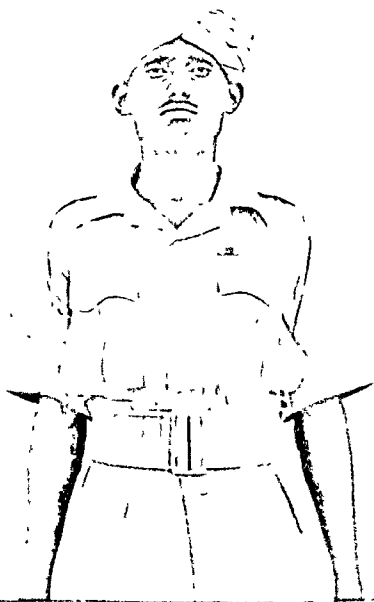
Jemadar Amar Singh  
Jemadar Dhera Singh

IDSM

12223 L/Naik Udho Ram  
 9770 Naik Umansab Khan  
 10556 Naik Ajaib Khan  
 13304 Sepoy Khansada  
 13770 Sepoy Krishan Singh



Sahadar Natha Singh, I.D.S.M., 1st Punjab Regiment  
A Jat Sikh from the Punjab.



Honorable Louis A. K. K. K., 1st Lt., 5th Maine Light Infantry.  
A Maine State Library Collection

Mentions	Major T G L'E Grant 2nd Lieutenant F W Mason Jemadar Khushi Ram 10166 Havildar Nagar Singh 11616 Naik Munshi Ram 13950 Sepoy Autar Singh 13003 L/Naik Sher Dil
	<i>5th Mahratta Light Infantry</i>
Bar to the DSO	Lieut Colonel D W Reid, DSO, MC
DSO	Major A E Cocksedge
MC	Captain P M W Doyle Captain D D I Boomgardt Captain A J Oldham Subadar Shrirang Lawand
IOM	Jemadar Sakaram Shinde 5128 Havildar Maruti Chawan 3389 Havildar Pandurang Kadam 5109 Havildar Venkat Chawan 5478 Naik Vishnu Mane 6048 Naik Rajaram Sawant 5639 Naik Dyanu Chawan 9731 Sepoy Pandurang Powar
IDSM	Subadar Pandurang Chauhan 3313 Naik Bala Kharade 2301 Naik Sitaram Mhaske 7215 Naik Baba Sahib Ingle 9245 Sepoy Babu Desai 8605 Sepoy Laku Jadhao
Mention	Major V C Griffin
	<i>6th Rajputana Rifles</i>
Victoria Cross	Subadar Richpal Ram
DSO	Lieut Colonel L Jones Lieutenant J McA Hadden



O.B.E	Major R B Broadbent
M.B.E	Captain D L Powell Jones
M.C. and Bar to the M.C	Captain E W Dixon
M.C. and Mention	Captain A T Murray
M.C	Captain A H Roosmale Cocq
	2nd Lieutenant J M Ashworth
	2nd Lieutenant P K Horwood
	Subadar Tota Ram, I.D.S.M
I.O.M. and I.D.S.M	Jemadar Hoshnar Singh
	11773 Havildar Bhima Ram
I.O.M	Subadar Bostan Khan
	Subadar Amar Singh
	Jemadar Jagna Ram
	Jemadar Niaz Ali Khan
	12603 Havildar Ganpat Ram
	14684 Havildar Habib Khan
	11440 Havildar Sheodan Singh
	14778 Havildar Goru Ram
	14017 Havildar Bhagirath Singh
	15159 Naik Bhopal Singh
	15956 L/Naik Anop Singh
	16249 L/Naik Bhaira Ram
	14615 L/Naik Mahji Khan
I.D.S.M	Subadar Feroze Khan
	Jemadar Gulab Khan
	Jemadar Harnarain Ram
	Jemadar Jowahir Singh
	11348 Havildar Harnath Singh
	13645 Havildar Sardara Ram
	15336 Naik Suba Khan
	9525 Naik Khema Ram
	12517 L/Naik Kara Ram
	14835 L/Naik Sagat Singh
	13941 Rifleman Dipa Ram
	13981 Rifleman Jiwan Singh
	12787 Rifleman Mumthal Ram
	14015 Rifleman Sobh Singh
	15787 Rifleman Amilal Ram
	16048 Rifleman Sanwat Singh
	16366 Havildar Chatterbuj Singh



The late Subadar Richpal Ram, v o., 6th Rajputana Rifles.



Havildar Bhimsa Ram, I.O.M., I.D.S.M., 6th Rajputana Rifles.  
Twice decorated; three times wounded; a gallant Jat from the Eastern Punjab.

Mentions	Jemadar Mohd Akram (twice mentioned)
	Lieut-Colonel P R H Skrine, DSO
	Lieut Colonel H E Greatwood
	Major R E G Bartholemew
	Captain G E Charter
	Captain H A Butler
	Captain R. R Mackenzie Macleod
	Lieutenant C Gilbert.
	Lieutenant G F T Mathews
	Subadar Major Narain Singh
	Subadar Mangla Ram
	Subadar Adalat Ram
	Subadar Karam Ilahi.
	Subadar Dal Singh
	Subadar Jiwan Ram
	Jemadar Shibaksha Ram
	Jemadar Hemraj Ram
	Jemadar Puran Chand Ram
	Jemadar Tarashand Ram
	9548 C H M Jowahir Singh
	15205 Havildar Roshnar Singh
	11552 Naik Harnath Singh
	14303 Naik Mohran Ram
	9920 L/Naik Hannand Ram
	10483 L/Naik Manshand Ram
	12138 L/Naik Ali Shah
	14815 Rifleman Fateh Ram
	15413 Rifleman Gurdhar Ram

*7th Rajput Regiment*

OBE	Major J A Salomons
MC	Captain G W Dimsey
I.D.S.M	13061 L/Naik Bajrangbali Singh
	13647 Sepoy Ghulam Rabani

Mentions	Lieut-Colonel S W Bower Captain F J Ballin Subadar-Major and Hon Lieutenant Behari Singh, O.B.I. Subadar Zammarad Khan Subadar Thakur Singh Jemadar Abdullah Khan 19497 L/Naik Mohd Azam 14562 Sepoy Sundar Singh 14676 Sepoy Dharam Singh 14882 Sepoy Noor Khan 12575 Sepoy Rawat Singh
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*10th Baluch Regiment*

DSO	Lieut-Colonel B. L Sundias Smith. Major D R E R Bateman
I.O.M.	Subadar Udho Ram 12327 Havildar Mohd Khan.
I.D.S.M.	Subadar Nawab Khan Jemadar Mir Ali 9237 Havildar Bishan Dass 12638 Havildar Fazal Hussein. 10822 L/Naik Sher Khan 15649 Naik Zari Marjan
Mentions	Major L V S Sherwood 8554 Havildar Saleh Din

*11th Sikh Regiment*

MBE	Captain H A Hughes
M.C.	Major G H M Vean 2nd Lieutenant A. McNiven 2nd Lieutenant Mohd Siddiq
I.O.M.	Subadar Fattah Mohd 12533 Naik Ujagar Singh
I.D.S.M.	12563 Havildar Karam Singh 9185 Naik Chanan Singh 10288 L/Naik Daulat Singh 16626 Sepoy Na'ib Singh 14456 Sepoy Bachan Singh

*12th Frontier Force Regiment*

DSO	Major A J W MacLeod
M.B.E.	Captain J L'A Bell



Captain E W Dixon, M.C., 6th Rajputana Rifles  
In normal times he is a journalist.



Havildar Mohamed Khan A.D.M., 13th Frontier Force Rifles.  
A Pathan from the North West Frontier Province

MC	Captain S H Raw
	Lieutenant E G D Heard
IOM and IDSM	9136 Havildar Mir Hasan
IOM	11757 Havildar Chhaju Ram
	10283 Havildar Khushal Khan
IDSM	Subadar Bela Singh
	Jemadar Shandi Gul
	9087 Naik An Mir
Mention	Major H M de V Moss
	<i>13th Frontier Force Rifles</i>
OBE	Colonel D Russell MC
	Lieut Colonel S K Turney, MC
MC	Major Mohd Sher Khan
	Captain Anant Singh Pathania
	Lieutenant Sadiqullah Khan
IOM and IDSM	16074 L/Naik Rakhim Gul
IOM	Jemadar Munshi Ram
	10805 Havildar Natha Singh
	13518 Havildar Paras Ram
	17664 Sepoy Hakim Khan
	17767 Sepoy Saudagar Singh
IDSM	11852 Havildar Bhagwan Singh
	14629 Havildar Mohd Khan
	9982 Havildar Babu Singh
	12847 Naik Indar Singh
	12855 Naik Aikka Singh
	<i>14th Punjab Regiment</i>
MC	Lieut. Col W A Palmer
Mention	Major G F M Stray MC
	<i>15th Punjab Regiment</i>
OBE and Mention	Lieut Colonel A H Pollock MC
MC	2nd Lieutenant A J Block
Mentions	Major R C Nicholas
	Captain E M Kemys Jenkins
	Captain R N M Milton
	Subadar Maqsood Shah
	Subadar Sahib Gul IDSM
	9853 CHM Mohd Iqbal Khan
	10975 Naik Nur Mohi
	11721 Sepoy Fateh Khan



*16th Punjab Regiment*

CBE and Mention	Lieut-Colonel W J Cawthorn
DSO	Lieut-Colonel S S Lavender
MC	Major M C B Steele
	Subadar Ghulam Rasul
IOM	Subadar Ganga Ram
IDSM	8069 Havildar Gulshaid
	9616 Havildar Chasmi Nazir
	9163 L/Naik Hans Raj
	9463 L/Naik Jaswant Singh
	9811 Sepoy Jagat Ram
	9445 Sepoy Mohd Hussain
Mention	Major J A Hubert

*18th Royal Garhwal Rifles*

DSO	Lieut-Colonel S E Tayler
MC	Captain A H Cooke
	2nd Lieutenant A Young
IOM and IDSM	Jemadar Rithu Sing Rawat
IOM	Subadar Man Sing Negi
	5108 Havildar Balwant Sing Guerin
	4694 L/Naik Sher Sing Kunwar
	5913 Rifleman Ram Sing Bisht
IDSM	Jemadar Ram Sing Amwan
	6043 Havildar Sher Sing Rana
	5483 Rifleman Dalbir Sarki
	4097 Rifleman Alam Sing Bisht
	6620 Rifleman Indar Sing Rawat
	3979 L/Naik Bahadur Sing Rawat
Mention	7426 L/Naik Shankar Sing Rawat

*19th Hyderabad Regiment*

IOM	Jemadar Mohan Singh Mahar
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*2nd Gurkha Rifles*

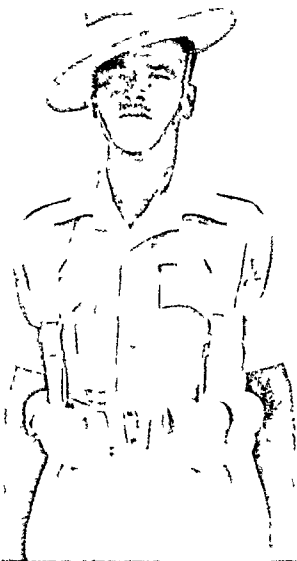
OBE	Lieut-Colonel R A Hutton
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*4th Gurkha Rifles*

IDSM	7919 Rifleman Deba Gurung
	7946 Rifleman Ganbahadur Gurung

*6th Gurkha Rifles*

OBE	Lieut Colonel T N Smith
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Havildar Sher Sing Rana, 1 D.S.M., 15th Royal Garhwal Rifles.  
A Garhwali from the Himalaya foothills in the north of the United Provinces.

*16th Punjab Regiment*

CBE and Mention	Lieut-Colonel W J Cawthorn
DSO	Lieut Colonel S S Lavender
MC	Major M C B Steele
	Subadar Ghulam Rasul
IOM	Subadar Ganga Ram
IDS M	8069 Havildar Gul haid
	9616 Havildar Chasem i-Nazir
	9163 L/Naik Hans Raj
	9463 L/Naik Jaswant Singh
	9811 Sepoy Jagat Ram
	9445 Sepoy Mohd Hussain
Mention	Major J A Hubert

*18th Royal Garhwal Rifles*

DSO	Lieut Colonel S E Tayler
MC	Captain A H Cooke
	2nd Lieutenant A Young
IOM and IDS M	Jemadar Rithu Sing Rawat
IOM	Subadar Man Sing Negi
	5108 Havildar Balwant Sing Gusain
	4694 L/Naik Sher Sing Kunwar
	5913 Rifleman Ram Sing Bisht
IDS M	Jemadar Ram Sing Amwan
	6043 Havildar Sher Sing Rana
	5483 Rifleman Dalbir Sarki
	1097 Rifleman Alam Sing Bisht
	6620 Rifleman Indar Sing Rawat
	3979 L/Naik Bahadur Sing Rawat
Mention	7426 L/Naik Shankar Sing Rawat

*19th Hyderabad Regiment*

IOM	Jemadar Mohan Singh Mahar
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*2nd Gurkha Rifles*

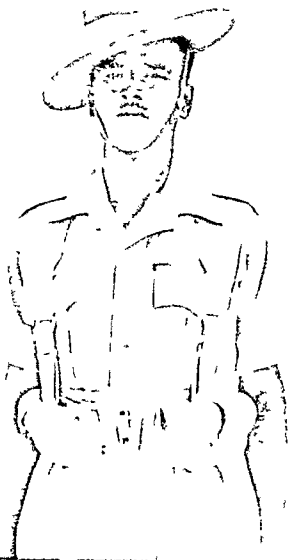
OBE	Lieut Colonel R A Hutton
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*4th Gurkha Rifles*

IDS M	7919 Rifleman Deba Gurung
	7946 Rifleman Ganbahadur Gurung

*6th Gurkha Rifles*

OBE	Lieut Colonel T N Smith
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Havildar Sher Singh Rana, I.D.S.M., 16th Royal Garhwal Rifles.  
A Garhwali from the Himalaya foothills in the north of the United Provinces.



Subadar Feroz Khan, I.D.S.M., 6th Rajputana Rifles.  
A Punjabi Musalman from the Salt Range in the North-West of the Punjab.

*Royal Indian Army Service Corps*

OBE and Mention	Lieut Colonel E C T Mitchley
OBE	Lieut-Colonel E V Hansford Lieut Colonel A R Wallis Lieut Colonel B S Sowton
MBE and Mention	Major W G H Bartholomew
MBE	Captain S J A Hill Captain E A Blessington Subadar Rattan Singh Subadar Mohd Hayat
MC	Captain T N Farmer
LD SM	505369 Naik Sucha Singh 508170 Sepoy Abdul Rahim SR/18632 LD Clerk Mohd Bux SR/120327 LD Storekeeper Karam Chand Praval
Mentions	Major J G Joyce (twice mentioned) Major D N Davidson Captain G M Watts Subadar Abdul Rahman Beg 100945 CQM H Abdul Majid IWO Ali Shah Akbar LD Clerk Krishnamurti, BA Captain E G A Letts Captain E M Webb MT/505875 L/Naik Didar Singh MT/505578 Naik Ahmad Khan 502972 Sepoy Mohd Farid

*Indian Army Ordnance Corps*

OBE	Lieut Colonel C E Windle, MC Colonel P F B N Armstrong
MBE	Major A V Vokins Lieutenant E A Oakes Lieutenant P G Knight Conductor H L Hull Conductor G E Palmer Sub Conductor J Devine
BEM	Sgt J V T Duggan

Mentions.	Major G. M. Blythe. Conductor L. A. N. King, M.M. Sub-Conductor F. Millican. S/Sgt. W. J. Mitchell. S/Sgt. J. Boyce. S/Sgt T. Kay. Subadar Farman Shah. I.W.O. Mohd Shaffi. 600070 Fitter Fazal Ilahi.
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*Indian Medical Service.*

C.B.E.	Colonel G. R. Lynn, D.S.O.
O.B.E.	Major D. N. Chakravarti.
M.B.E.	Major Wajid Ali Burki. Captain L. R. Waghlikar.
M.C.	Captain Prithvi Raj Bali. Captain M. C. L. Smith. Captain Hardit Singh Ahluwalia. Captain S. N. Chatterjee. Captain L. Nandkeolyar.
Mentions.	Lieutenant Safdar Ali Khan. Lieut.-Colonel A. N. Sharma. Major M. H. Wace. Captain W. B. Stiver. Captain R. Y. Taylor. Captain D. D. Verma. Captain D. R. Cattanack.

*Indian Medical Department.*

D.C.M.	Assistant Surgeon E. E. Vaughan.
M.B.E.	W.O.I. S. F. Gomez.
Mentions.	Jemadar Mukand Lal Verma. Jemadar Bala Dutt Joshi.

*Indian Hospital Corps.*

I.D.S.M.	Jemadar Ram Ajor. I/A/11568 Naik Basant Singh. 12072 L/Naik Amir Din. H/90213 Sepoy Jaswant Singh.
B.E.M.	C/2128 Havildar Balmokand.
Mentions	2/C/9 Havildar Sohan Singh Sodhi. 2/N/119 Sepoy N. Gopalan. 720026 Nursing Sepoy Iftikhar Ahmad.



Lieutenant Colonel Devendra Nath Chakravarti: O.B.E. Indian Medical Service





Colonel J B Dahson OBE 1st  
Administrative Staff Officer to the

*Indian Army Corps of Clerks.*

M.B.E.	Conductor W. Pitt.
Mentions.	Conductor J. J. Coleman.
	Sergt. W. Search.

*Indian Ecclesiastical Establishment.*

Mentions.	The Rev. F. X. Singleton.
	The Rev. T. Walters.

*Indian State Forces.**The Jammu and Kashmir Mountain Artillery.*

M.C.	Lieutenant Madan Lal Vaid.
I.D.S.M.	L/Naik Qabala Singh.
	Driver Devi Dayal.

*The Jammu and Kashmir Infantry.*

I.D.S.M.	Naik Naranjan Singh.
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